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SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

HOW NINTENDO IS
TRANSFORMING THE MOST
FAMOUS FACE IN GAMES

#309

SEPTEMBER 2017

You never fought that war. You weren't even there, man

So, how was your E3? It's a question that used to be reserved for the lucky few: those with a professional interest in the most important event on the videogame calendar. Assets came on discs – sometimes even on slides – and you'd have to carry them home with you, unless you were on deadline, in which case they'd be couriered. If you had copy to file you'd fax it or, in the case of one tabloid journo whose legend lives in infamy, literally phone it in while lounging by the hotel pool. Unless you were there, or knew someone who was, you'd know nothing of E3 until the mags hit the newsagents' shelves weeks later.

Needless to say, things have changed. Online outlets keep more staff at home than they send to the show these days, since you can cover it more efficiently from the office, where the Wi-Fi actually works. Once the doors open, you'll need to be there to play anything, sure, but there'll be full gameplay footage online within hours. To punters, it's just like being there.

The thing is, though, you really have to go to E3 to understand it. There are few ways in life, and even fewer legal ones, of feeling the kind of buzz you get when a platform holder pulls out a stunning surprise at its press conference and an arena full of people explodes in delight. You have to stand in the blazing LA sunshine waiting for the doors to open, knowing you're minutes away from being among the first to play some hotly anticipated favourite. These, at least, are the things we tell ourselves so we can sleep at night. Once the jetlag's worn off, anyway.

E3 has changed a lot over the years. It has switched venues and cities; companies have quit it and returned; it has seen a shift from print media to online, and from online to video. This year, for the first time, E3 opened its doors to the public. It was a dramatic change, and it made life difficult (though we still got out with over 50 pages of coverage). But as transformative as this year's event was, it can't hold a candle to the stunning makeover Nintendo has given Mario. The *Odyssey* story begins on p76.



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Better together

E3 2017 shines with some truly memorable displays of unlikely unity

We mostly remember the bad times. The standout moments of E3 conferences past tend to be infamous, rather than revered: we think of Mr Caffeine, of Ravidrums, giant enemy crabs and, well, just about everything at Konami's infamous conference in 2010. This year's show was not without its cringe, of course – we'll get to that later. But E3 2017's most enduring, endearing moment will live long in the memory for all the right reasons. It's the CEO of a colossal multinational publisher, and the most famous developer from a multinational platform holder, having a mock shootout with comically oversized guns in front of a worldwide audience of millions. Yves Guillemot and Shigeru Miyamoto's ten-second playfight will go down in history not only for its playful silliness; it was momentous, too, and set the tone for an E3 that was characterised by unity, of long-standing walls finally coming down.

Nintendo and Ubisoft have long been partners, sure, with the latter publishing games on the former's systems for generations. But as publishers, they are also rivals – especially at E3, where attention is so coveted. The reason for their coming together is *Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle*, a game whose existence had been rumoured since before Switch was even revealed, and widely written

off as a terrible idea. The leaker, however, omitted two crucial pieces of information. First, the game is basically XCOM in the Mushroom Kingdom; second, it is *fantastic*. The game went over brilliantly, and as Miyamoto and Guillemot mucked about on stage, the camera cut to creative director Davide Soliani, overcome, biting back tears. And to think people still try to tell you that E3 no longer matters.

E3 2017's most enduring, endearing moment will live long in the memory for all the right reasons

Elsewhere, Microsoft, for so long one of the biggest proponents of the walled software garden, tore down another barrier. It announced cross-platform multiplayer for *Minecraft* alongside a raft of sweeping changes that are finally starting to show why it paid \$2.5 billion for

Mojang's world-conquering block-builder. Psyonix would later do the same with *Rocket League*, announcing alongside the newly revealed Switch version that its astonishingly successful driving/football hybrid would enable players on just about every system to play against each other online.

Yes, just about – because Sony is still having none of it. Playing devil's advocate for a moment, the runaway market leader has no need to share its colossal userbase with other platform holders; there are already, to put it mildly, sufficiently busy *Minecraft* and *Rocket League* communities on PlayStation

platforms, and why should Sony let its rivals take a slice of that pie? It's a reasonable enough perspective in the boardroom, perhaps, but this is an ideological issue, a question of values. It sticks in the craw that a company which has spent the generation claiming its business is For The Players should be the last one bricking up the walls that keep them apart. For The Players Who Give Us Money, admittedly, doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

This was an uncomfortable year for PlayStation in general. Its E3 win streak was always going to come to an end at some point, and with no new hardware to announce – and knowing that Microsoft would be pushing its new offering and a resurgent Nintendo would have *Super Mario Odyssey* – it made sense to have something of a fallow year. Shawn Layden, the sole stage presence, bookended an hour of game trailers and demos that was solid enough, but lacked the spark and spectacle of its show-stopping recent conferences. It was all oddly muted.

And we could have done with a pick-me-up by then, since Sony's show brought to a close a marathon three-day run of events and press conferences that had us pining for the days when everything was condensed into a single, if exhausting, day. Two years ago, Bethesda brought E3's opening party forward to the Sunday night; last year EA moved it back to Sunday morning, and this year it took things even further, beginning its three- ►





Shigeru Miyamoto (left) and Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot take the stage to announce *Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle*



Microsoft's staging changes little year on year; we wish they'd at least move the teleprompter, which half the crowd can see. We like surprises too

day EA Play event with a livestreamed press conference on Saturday morning. This was the second year of EA's fan-focused experiment, and it went over well enough, with the more sizeable Hollywood Palladium complex a much better fit than last year's cramped showing at a hotel in the shadow of E3's home, the LA Convention Centre. On stage, even robotic CEO Andrew Wilson managed to show a little humanity when bashfully acknowledging the lukewarm response to 2015's *Star Wars Battlefront*. More came from affable, yet freakishly tall VP of studios Patrick Söderlund, but he had nothing on Josef Fares. The director of *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons* is the latest to sign up to the EA Originals indie initiative with his co-op crime tale *A Way Out*, and he stole the show, passionate, animated and just the right side of bonkers.

Despite all the power contained within, Xbox One X is the smallest console Microsoft has ever made

EA says that Play is about getting games into the hands of its customers sooner, and while that rings true, the live show suggested that it is probably more interested in the hands of people with millions of YouTube subscribers.

Sizzle reels of famous – forgive us – content creators praising EA's games made the publisher's priorities clear, yet the show also proved that these things have their limits. YouTube prankster Jesse Wellens, tasked for some reason with introducing *Need For Speed Payback*, had an absolute brainfart on stage: whether the teleprompter failed him or he got stagefright, EA will have learned that

having 10 million subscribers on YouTube does not mean you can speak live to all of them at once. A cynic might wonder if maybe that didn't need testing in a live environment to be shown up as a bad idea but really, we don't want to rub it in. Poor sod.

Sunday was *Microsoft's* day, with the platform holder finally cottoning on to the obvious fact that going live on Monday morning means you only get a couple of hours in the headlines before attention changes to the other conferences, and only a few more hours after that before Sony stuffs it up for you by announcing something that's not coming out until 2025. For all its power, Xbox One X was a difficult sell. It's a very expensive way ►

Having 10 million subscribers on YouTube does not mean you can speak live to all of them at once



Q&A

Albert Penello

Senior director of
product management
and planning, Xbox



The Xbox conference must be tough, because you always go first. Now you've seen everyone else's hand, how's the mood around the camp?

I liked our conference. We showed a big diversity of games; I think we showed off stuff that shows off the cutting edge of tech on X; I think people wanted to see diversity in genres and creators. Then we closed off with backwards compatibility, which we knew was going to be a huge moment in the show and something I know Phil [Spencer, head of Xbox] and a lot of us that have been around for a long time have been pushing to see happen. I also appreciated, as the guy that was responsible for the hardware, that we spent a little bit of time on the machine, and talked a little bit to people at E3 about the box. Typically that gets pushed to a different event at a different time, so I really liked that we took a moment to talk about it.

How hard was it to talk about? You have to sell it, but must also have to make sure that you're not alienating people who are happy with their launch console. How hard is it to get that message right?

I've been in the games business for a long time – I don't like to say how long, because it's a pyrrhic victory. I've been around since before we launched the first Xbox, and every generation brings its own opportunities and challenges. We really had to sit down and think, 'How do we do this right?' If we're going to introduce this concept of doing a console in the middle of a cycle, the console business doesn't work that way, so we've got to get this right. It has to be simple. Your stuff has to work. It can't be some weird case of like, which disc runs where under what conditions. It has to be super powerful, it has to be a big leap from what you've got, and everything's gotta work – you can't make anybody feel dumb. Grandma's gotta go in and buy a disc for the kid for Christmas, and she doesn't want to get it wrong. It's actually kind of easy to message it when, in the beginning, we started by trying to ask ourselves those hard questions. It all started, I think, with the right beginning.

Was the process of getting Xbox backwards compatibility more challenging than 360?

That's probably a better question for the emulation software team. These guys are amazing. This is one of the nice things about working at Microsoft: you have software people.

And the nice thing about working at Xbox is that there are a bunch of us that have been around for a long time. And Phil in particular is a guy who loves games. I still have my ColecoVision, and my Atari – I'm teaching my daughter about games from the beginning. The idea that you lose your games is kind of a bummer about console generations. And so after we reinvigorated 360, we thought, there's a bunch of great games on the original console. We're going to bring back some fan favourites.

It's not going to be the same size of programme as the 360 one, but I like the fact that we're doing it. It really shows that Phil and the team care about content. All of the other stuff we're doing – Play Anywhere, the stuff between Xbox One S and X, 360 compatibility – it's about this idea that it's all about the games. That's what you really care about, and this device is a thing that you buy and you don't have to lose your library. That's where we see this industry going.

It's an ideological thing really, isn't it? Backwards compatibility isn't the most used feature on the console.

Well, it depends on whose data you're looking at...

Sure, but people aren't playing Halo 3 to the same extent people are playing Halo 5. It's something



Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge was confirmed as being among the first Xbox titles to be playable on Xbox One. Spencer, charmingly, referred to the console as "OG Xbox"

that you want to offer, rather than something you necessarily need to.

It is. This is always the classic discussion about back compat. My daughter is two-and-a-half, and I play a lot of *Geometry Wars* with her. It's a great visual stimulus, and I don't have to worry about anything, and the music's great. Then you'll get cases like what we did with *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*, where it actually went back and charted. So talking about usage is tough, because obviously the newest stuff is always the most used. But as Phil said, over half of Xbox One owners have played a [backwards-compatible] title. So I think it is an important feature, because there might be a time where you're going to want to go back. Like you said, it's an important philosophical thing that we really believe in.

After a very rough start to the generation, we sense every year that Microsoft is becoming more confident. Now you no longer have to worry about a power deficiency; you will soon have the most powerful console on the market. How does that change your attitude?

I think there's a difference between confidence and arrogance. Phil has been in the business for a long time, he has a personality and an attitude towards this that I think permeates the team. A lot of us have been around for a long time; a lot of us are the

same people that started at the very beginning. I think what you're really sensing is, we're excited. We've been wanting to talk about this for a long time. To have worked for so long, to really want to do something special and then have that land [really well]? I think we're just really excited about it.

You were deeply involved in the hardware. Is there one part of it of which you are particularly personally proud?

For me it's the compatibility, because I think it's the thing that people assume was the easiest, but was actually the most challenging. Because yes, they are all based on a family of x86 processors, but they are not PCs. There is a lot of custom silicon. And the thing about consoles is that developers do find ways to trick them, and do things that get every ounce of performance out of them. Building a system that's resilient enough to not only have them work, but have them work *better*, and be able to deliver the level of performance needed to do all the new stuff, is actually the least appreciated, but biggest challenge that the team had to hit. And oh, by the way: it was the one thing that you could not get wrong.

We figured you'd say the form factor. Getting that much horsepower into such a small casing is no mean feat.

We knew when we built this thing it was going to be a premium device. And that meant there was not a part of this console that we wanted to underdeliver. That really gave us an opportunity to do things like bring in vapour chambers. Which we did not invent, but they're usually reserved for really high end cards. They're very sophisticated, they're more challenging to manufacture than a typical heat pipe, and we are the first mass-market product to use one. But you're not going to get that size without one. We talk about the Hovis method; there's a guy at work named Bill Hovis, he had to invent a process to allow each and every console to get a custom power profile. We needed to eke that level of efficiency out of every box to get the quietness, the reliability and all the things we wanted to get out of the console. The team, they wanted to show off!

To you, Hovis is the cutting edge of tech. To us it's an old-fashioned brand of bread, conjuring up images of flat caps and cobbled streets.

OK, someone owes me money. You're the first to bring that up.

Q&A
Jim Ryan
Global head, marketing
and sales, Sony
Interactive Entertainment



Your conference felt oddly low-key this year, lacking the usual showmanship we expect from Sony.

There was a certain amount of bombast and loud bangs. Do you think that's a bad thing?

No, but in a year when you know Microsoft and Nintendo have new hardware, it makes sense for you to pare things back and focus on games. Was that the thinking?

Yeah. Obviously last year was our year of innovation with PSVR and PS4 Pro. It was [a case of], 'Let's let the games do the talking.' It was really no more and no less than that. It's often easy to sort of impute some grand stratagem to something that's often quite straightforward.

How much do you think about the other conferences when planning your own? Clearly it's a competitive business, but you need to be proactive.

If you try and set out your own stall by reference to what somebody else is doing, that way lies failure and ruin. If you have confidence and belief in your own plans, then just lay them out and let gamers decide. There are certain areas where we've gone one way and our various competitors are going in different directions, and I think that's fine. It's all good. If we try to mirror, or contradict, or diss what somebody else is doing, I don't think that speaks well of us.

What does the slate of games you showed on stage tell us about Sony's strategy for the next 12 or 18 months?

I think it talks quite a lot to breadth and diversity, and I want to include in that comment some games that were not actually at the show.

Such as?

The Playlink series, which may not be to the palette of many of your readers. We need to talk to a totally different audience, and one that is perhaps, in many cases, rather intimidated by the interface of the DualShock 4. To bring in a suite of games that is more social, that is easier to interact with and that is kind of going back to the style of games that we had great success with back in the PS2 generation, with EyeToy, Singstar and Buzz – and Nintendo, obviously, with the Wii – we're very interested in and excited by that.

It's that point in the generation where you look to a wider audience, isn't it?

Yeah. These initiatives, by their nature,

are speculative, and not without risk. But I think if you have ambitions to go from 50 to 100 million, you have to start to at least experiment with some of these things.

One thing that wasn't clear last night is what PS4 owners are meant to spend the rest of the year looking forward to.

I understand that. We probably haven't been sufficiently vocal about a year in which we've had *Horizon Zero Dawn*, which has been a hugely successful new IP. And breaking new IP – and you know this as well as I do – is fraught with peril. We've got that, we've got *Uncharted* and we've got *Gran Turismo Sport*, all in the same year, all from our studios, all exclusive to PlayStation. I think that's a pretty decent statement. I think that many of the games you saw last night that are coming in 2018 are looking very strong.

Plus, there's been a realisation across the industry that it's no longer solely about the final three months of the year.

I totally agree. It's very interesting to speculate about what might have happened if we'd gone to market with *Horizon* in November. I think having that space in March, whether it's space at retail, organisational clutter internally, the PR thing, mindspace with gamers... Really it can only be a good thing if we're starting to get more adult as an industry, spreading the releases across the year in a sensible manner.

"I think many of the games you saw last night that are coming in 2018 are looking very strong"

In a few months you will no longer lay claim to having the most powerful console on the market. We have a resurgent Nintendo. How does all that impact on the way you run the PlayStation business?

Obviously, we watch what they're doing very carefully. I think a resurgent Nintendo is just great for the industry on so many levels. And you and I having this conversation about Sony versus Microsoft, it creates interest. They'll be looking for more space in stores; hopefully that means more space for the category overall. I'm not at all unhappy about it.

Specifically regarding Pro and X, by the time they launch we'll have been in the market for a full year. Pro accounts for one in five of all PS4s sold since we launched; we're really pleased about that, it's way ahead of the expectations that we set ourselves. They have their plans, we have ours, and we'll see what happens. Turning the temperature up on the whole thing is no bad thing at all.

Is it time for a cheeky Pro price drop? We thought you might have snuck that in the press conference to steal some thunder.

[Laughs] Well, we said nothing about price. They've announced their price, and we have ours. It's not always a guide to anything, but when they're at a significant premium to us, it can be a struggle for them. I don't see any pressure arising as a consequence of any announcements that have been made this week.

Does the success Nintendo has enjoyed with Switch give you pause for thought about portables?

It's still very early. Many things Nintendo does are so disruptive and different that it takes quite a long time to understand them, and I don't think we're at that stage yet with Switch. Like I say, it's great that they're back, it's great to see them doing so well.

Minecraft and Rocket League are offering cross-platform multiplayer on every system except yours. How can a company with the slogan For The Players be the last one holding up that wall?

We don't have any profound philosophical stance against crossplay. We've done it before and we'll do it again. With *Minecraft*, it's enjoyed by a hugely wide demographic, many of whom are very young and have been trusted to go online within the confines of the PlayStation Network by their parents. I think opening them up to possible experiences that are beyond our ability to manage is something we take quite seriously. So it's very easy to trot out a slogan, but these issues are fairly deep, fairly profound. We don't have any rule that we apply, we just test these things against a variety of criteria on a case-by-case basis.

The last few years have been very busy in terms of hardware. We've had mid-gen power refreshes, which we're not used to. We've had VR headsets and Switch. Do you think that's going to slow down now? Or does the effect of the smartphone market, where people expect these regular updates, mean this is the new normal?

It's a very interesting question. The cultural phenomenon of regular updates to smartphones and tablets is without question, perhaps subliminally, colouring mindsets. And the days of a 13-year PS2 cycle will almost certainly never repeat themselves. But equally, a platform is a very delicate ecosystem, and if that platform is to succeed, you've got to give those who make content for it the chance to recoup on it. At the end of the day, like it or not, these are businesses. We struck – and Microsoft has as well – a good balance of innovation within the confines of the platform. Also, services which operate agnostically of particular hardware, like PlayStation Now for example, are something you're going to see more of. I think we're only six months in to Pro, and it's too early to tell. X hasn't launched yet. I don't know if this is the way forward or not.



Knowledge Is Power is part of the Playlink initiative, which lets players use smartphones as PS4 controllers. The link to PS2 hit *Buzz!* is obvious – and, you suspect, intentional



of playing games you already own, that also risks making owners of the base model feel like they're now sitting at the kids' table. This, however, was a finely judged conference, with a decent balance of hardware bluster and game demos. Sadly the frequent trumpeting of the word 'exclusive' should have been accompanied by a bunch of asterisks; much of what was shown is either headed to PC at the same time, or to other consoles later on. Strip away all the caveats and Microsoft's firstparty lineup is as troubling as ever. *Sea Of Thieves* is great and *Crackdown 3* is, well, *Crackdown*. Beyond that, however, the firstparty Xbox studio lineup is too mired in the grind of *Halo*, *Forza* and *Gears* to suggest that anything truly exciting is on the horizon.

Still, if it was excitement you were after, then Bethesda had you covered – so long as a mocked-up themepark, a surprise set by MOR EDM-peddlers The Chainsmokers, and a few trailers are your idea of exciting. This was the Bethesda presser's third year, which means the publisher can't really take a year off now without losing face. After all that we were

E3 is, for all the doomsaying, getting bigger. And it's doing so by bringing people together

hoping for a quiet Monday, but it took us back to EA Play, then to Ubisoft for that wonderful Miyamoto moment, then over to Microsoft again for a hands-on event, then finally to Sony. Only the final journey was walkable, and we have one major takeaway from the day. A message to Los Angeles Uber drivers: we know making a living in the gig economy is rough, and you need to keep costs down. But please, if a gaggle of sweaty Brits crams into your back seat, do us a solid and crank up the air conditioning.

After all that, there was the small matter of the biggest videogame show on Earth. And while

Miyamoto, Guillemot, *Minecraft* and *Rocket League* had done their bit for breaking down borders, E3 organisers the ESA had saved the best for last. For the first time, E3 was open to the public, with some 15,000 extra bodies helping fill up a show that has, over the last few years, felt progressively emptier. E3 2017 was packed, sweaty and teeming, and honestly a bit of a nightmare for anyone with appointments to keep. In years past, even at its busiest, E3 has always

worked: everyone inside the LA Convention Centre has somewhere to be, and a desire to get there on time. A sudden influx of people with no real agenda meant that the first day in particular was an absolute mess. *Call Of Duty: World War II* was at capacity within an hour every day. On Wednesday, Nintendo did it in four minutes.

Yet while it made life difficult for people scurrying between appointments, game makers were delighted. Every developer we spoke to was delighted by the change: more people were playing their games and more were talking about them, sharing their delight on social media in their thousands. It was a headache, yes, but it was also a celebration. Yet most of the people we spoke to agreed that something, somewhere, will have to give. The model of Gamescom or Tokyo Game Show, where the trade has the floor to itself for a day or two before the public are allowed in, seems most likely. A change of venue – or dramatic remodel of the existing one – is another option. Either way, it's a good problem to have. E3 is, for all the doomsaying, actually getting bigger. And it's doing so by bringing people together. It would be a shame if the price of success would be pulling them apart. ■

After last year's Hyrule stylings, Nintendo made up its 2017 booth like New Donk City. It was quite a sight, if you could actually get to it through the crowds





BLUE MOON

Funomena's new fairytale is a therapeutic place to play

Despite its charming jewel tones and tiny feathered protagonist, *Luna* has quite a painful premise. "It's a game about mistakes," Funomena CEO **Robin Hunicke** tells us of her new VR adventure, which is due later this year for PC and Rift. "In our cultures, a lot of the dialogue about mistakes comes in the form of shaming or blaming oneself, or others, for having done what humans do – which is try things and fail."

Luna aims to challenge that. The story starts with Bird, who is tricked by wily Owl into swallowing the last piece of a waning Moon and upsetting the balance of nature. The rest involves putting the pieces back together: reassembling constellations, arranging terrarium-style levels and helping fellow animals who have also been fooled.

Physical interaction using Oculus Touch is designed to be therapeutic, down to the softened appearance of Bird's firstperson talons. Tracing environmental elements produces wonderful shivers of sound, scored by *Journey* composer Austin Wintory. It's a memorial score, we're told – Wintory's father passed away shortly before the beginning of the project.

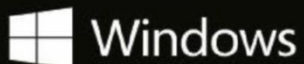
Luna not only offers a portrayal of emotional turmoil, but also a way to physically engage with and work through it – whether the trauma is fictional or personal. Like Wintory, Hunicke has recently lost a father figure, and *Luna* is a reaction to her grief. "As you get older, you see the same kinds of pain over and over in people's lives," she says. "It makes you want to build things that help."



While *Luna* will be playable without VR, Rift – and Touch – seems like the optimal way to play. Hunnicke says that the game's storytelling techniques “involve the idea that your touch, the energy that you put into this space, is what’s really healing it”



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Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



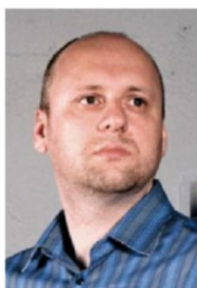
"We signed things that I thought, 'Hey, from a PR standpoint it would be easy for me to put a trailer on screen', but I know the game is **not coming for three years.**"

Phil Spencer shows Microsoft's new-found confidence with one of a series of cheeky E3 jabs at Sony



"Making political statements are for other people to do. We want people to **smile and have fun** when they play our games."

But, Reggie Fils-Aimé, surely politics can be happy and fun—ah. Yes. Point taken



"I don't want the game to have something to say, because I don't see myself **delivering a message** to people."

Famed videogame storyteller David Cage sets the cause of videogame storytelling back to the dark ages

"I always used to laugh about this... I understand why the media go through that 'who won?' routine but could you tell me, looking back, **who won E3 2009?**"

Come on, Phil Harrison. We're all going to take the Project Milo demo to the grave with us



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game VR Game Stage
Manufacturer Taito

It's been a quiet few years in the arcade scene for Taito. Acquired by Square Enix in 2005, it has spent recent times working more on smartphones than coin-ops. Three years on from its previous arcade outing, *Left 4 Dead: Survivors*, Taito is at last making its return to the scene. And, inevitably, it involves virtual reality.

And as is rapidly becoming the fashion, it's a platform, rather than a single game, which Taito is focusing on. VR Game Stage is a cluster of four enclosed spaces, each with a single raised display, in which players can choose from a selection of preinstalled games. The obvious highlight is *Oneman Vurger*: also available on GearVR, it tells of a man, George, who loves hamburgers so much he opens his own restaurant. No one wants to work with him, however, so he must cook and serve burgers to order by himself.

Seven other games have been confirmed, ranging from the predictable (swordfighting, archery) to the gently intriguing (a music game called *Electric Knight: Cyber Club VR*). And, of course, to the creepily Japanese: one game has you play basketball while girls in skimpy outfits try to block your shots. It is called, inevitably, *Basketball Babe*. It's disappointing that Taito hasn't elected to put some of its own weight behind the platform's software offering: all the games so far are made by third parties. We have no idea how *Bubble Bobble* would work in VR but we hope someone, somewhere, is trying to figure it out.





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My Favourite Game

Sunil Patel

The subversive comedian on spending pocket money on Sega Power and playing Skyrim in co-op

Sunil Patel is an award-winning stand-up comedian, returning to the Edinburgh Fringe festival this year for a second performance. In addition to touring the country with his well-established brand of nihilistic comedy, he stars in Channel 5 mockumentary *Borderline* and runs a podcast called *Why Is Harriet Crying?* with fellow comedian Harriet Kemsley.

What was the first game to excite you?

It was before I had my own console, playing on my cousin's SNES. It was *Super Mario World*. We played it endlessly – it was a three-week summer holiday, it was really hot, and all we did was stay indoors, in this house in New Jersey, playing it. I didn't have a console for ages after that, because I had to wait until Christmas. And then instead of getting a SNES, I asked for a Master System – I don't know why.

Did you regret that?

I didn't, actually. I got a Master System because my parents said, "We'll buy you a console and one game," and the Master System had a game built in – so I could get the free game built in and an extra game. It was *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* that was built in. I think I got *Shinobi* as well. Do people who played games from that era insist that they were harder back then? I feel like they were. It's like GCSEs, isn't it?

Do you play games now, and do you find them easier?

I do, and I do. But I've got to the stage where I'm playing *Farming Simulator*. I

CROSSING BORDERS

Despite playing baggage handler Suj in successful airport mockumentary *Borderline*, Patel is keen not to limit himself to television alone. He's also acted in BBC iPlayer short film *The Fast & The Fool*, voiced a pessimistic elephant in animated short *Freaks Of Nature*, and even dual-wielded two lams in an advert for nasal spray. Somehow he still finds time to devote to his main gig; his latest stand-up show, *Titan*, begins on August 3 at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

like the fact that it's quite chilled out. There's no one else about in it. I was reading somewhere that a lot of YouTubers are people that used to play *Call Of Duty* online, and they just got tired and old. So now they play *Farming Simulator* instead. I never played *Call Of Duty* online. I find it a bit too hectic.

Your comedy's known for being quite dark, but it seems like you gravitate towards cheerful games.

The darkest game I've played is probably *Skyrim*. I never really got into *Resident Evil* or stuff like that. They scare me. When I played *Skyrim*, I'd play it with my housemate for hours, because we both didn't want to be playing it on our own. It's not even that scary, is it? I think we were both being really pathetic. *Skyrim*'s built for you to play on your own, but it's so much more fun when you've got someone else with you – reading the map and arguing with you. Any game can be multiplayer, I guess.

It's the exact opposite of performing stand-up, surely?

Comedy's quite a lonely business, so the last thing I want to do is play a game alone. But then nobody wants to play *Farming Simulator* with me. I did get my friend Jay involved for three hours and then he just got angry and left. We had an argument over which tractor to buy.

Did your interest in videogames translate into your talent for comedy?

As a kid, I couldn't afford to buy games a lot, so I always used to buy Sega Power. It was really funny – I think that was when Charlie Brooker used to write for it. The old games magazines were great for that. I remember I used to have a Commodore 64 just because I thought the games would be cheaper, on the cassette tapes, and you could buy the magazine and get a free game on the front. But they just never worked. Rubbish. The other thing to do on the Commodore 64 if you couldn't get the game to work was to do a bit of coding, and I was not going to do that. It was such a big risk,

wasn't it? You had to pay 30 quid for a cartridge, and you can't just take it back if it's shit. You're just stuck with this bad game, and all that money gone. You're not going to get that much pocket money again in the '90s.

"The last thing I want to do is play a game alone. But then nobody wants to play Farming Simulator with me"

What's your favourite game?

The one I always go back to – and it is just as boring as *Farming Simulator* – is probably *SimCity*. I can spend three days totally engrossed in it, and at the end of it I know I'll just be sick of it and I won't be addicted to it any more. Then I can go back to it again in six months' time. Anything else I'd probably get too stuck into. That's gone against everything I've said about enjoying games with other people. I'm mainly just interested in doing a great public transit system. That's mainly why I play games. That, and occasionally releasing *Godzilla*. ■





Comedy in games is "hard to get right", Patel tells us, but the funniest he's ever played is *Portal 2*: "I was surprised at how funny that was, because you have to be quite broad with these things."

WEBSITE

Speedrun World Records
bit.ly/speedWR

Speedrunning has grown accessible thanks to Twitch and YouTube – events like Awesome Games Done Quick have raised millions for charity. They tend to focus on the same games, however: perennial hits like *Ocarina Of Time*, *Super Mario 64* or *Dark Souls*. Those looking to marvel at unlikely fare should head here for a display of the full breadth of the speedrunning community. Every time you click 'New Run', you're treated to a random selection from a huge database of world-record speedruns – perhaps you'll bag the *Mass Effect* trilogy, but it's more likely you'll see someone banging through *Space Hunter*, *Doubutsu No Mori E+*, *Conduit 2*, or *Jeopardy* for the NES. It's equal parts fascinating and addictive, and who knows – you might even find a streamer whose relentless patter you can stand to subscribe to.



VIDEO

Max Payne: Retribution – Fan Film
bit.ly/paynefilm

An homage to Remedy and Rockstar's thirdperson shooter trilogy, and made on just £1,500 of Indiegogo budget, this is a surprisingly adept film-noir thriller from Nocturnal Pictures. It's just 44 minutes long, but packs plenty in: choreographed action scenes, bar-based brooding and devil worship feature – all acted, shot and edited in some style. Nocturnal has taken creative licence with the Payne games' plot, and the pace isn't as rollicking as a Hollywood flick, but it remains true to the Payne spirit – there are even whispers of it potentially becoming a Netflix series.

WEB GAME

Deadlines

bit.ly/deadlinesgame

A GIF of Ian Snyder's local two-player browser game grabs us: two lines dipping and dancing back and forth, the visual effect a glowstick's contents being smeared across glass. The rules are simple – be the taller line, eat the smaller line, avoid the sides. Pressing your single key has your line rear back to your side of the screen and grow taller; release it, and it hurtles at your opponent, becoming smaller. Best-of-five matches are tactical games of chicken whose nimble feints or shows of force are at times reminiscent of fighting game footsies. (The top of Snyder's blog, coincidentally, is currently home to a wonderfully thorough post on balancing the genre's mechanics.) It's simple, responsive and compulsive, even if its title is, in the weeks after E3, a little too close to the bone.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

HANDHELD

Nintendo 2DS XL
bit.ly/Nint2DSXL

The original 2DS was a curious thing: stripped of the 3DS's stereoscopic selling point and its clamshell form factor, it felt like a strange, grey-market knockoff of the real deal. For the kid-friendly console's XL version, however, Nintendo has hewn much closer to the system's original design. Indeed, this is better thought of as a pared-back, cost-cutting version of the New 3DS XL. While there's no 3D effect, everything else is present and correct, including a clamshell design, extra processing grunt and RAM, a C-stick and Amiibo support. Using cheaper matte plastic means there's been a substantial reduction in weight, but the reintroduced hinge is strong enough to withstand tiny hands. If you're after something to distract your demonic offspring from a precious Switch, here you go.



continue

Cry tech

Devs brought passion, as well as the usual talent, to E3 2017

SNES machina

Nintendo's miniconsole becomes the first Edge preorder of the year

Public friend

Opening up E3 to the masses made for the best atmosphere in years

Picking up pace

Speedrun festival SGDQ eases the relentless pain of Edge deadline week

quit

Hopping block

Project Rap Rabbit misses its Kickstarter goal by a mile

Mini milked

Retailers: if you know something big's coming, spin up more servers

Crowded house

Unfortunately we were late for everything. Apologies to all affected

Slow motion

The crushing post-E3 jetlag seems to get worse every year

TWEETS

Crystal Palace has dinosaurs, a radio tower, a sphinx and a maze. It's crying out for an open-world game, basically.

Mike Bithell @mikebithell
Creator, *Thomas Was Alone*

Whenever I see someone putting *Crash Bandicoot* on the same level as *Mario 64* I can only assume they've not played *Mario 64*.

Matthew Castle @mrbasil_pesto
Editor in chief, Xbox On

*President of Microsoft watching *Mario + Rabbids* reveal* Get *Halo* and *Jackbox Party Pack* on the phone. We're making a fighting game.

Jared Rosen @notquitefrodo
Senior creative producer, Riot Games



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DISPATCHES

SEPTEMBER



Issue 308

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation Plus

Found footage

I'm typing this whilst watching one of the major publisher's E3 briefings. I won't single them out; the briefing I've watched has simply been the straw that broke the camel's back. My issue: CGI or pre-rendered trailers. What on earth are these accomplishing? I can almost understand their presence when they are thrown online two years before release. A little 15-second alert to let fans know that something they're crazy about is about to re-emerge. But what I've witnessed so far from streaming the E3 conferences is anything but.

This is what irks me: I've watched numerous game reveals this E3 open with a CGI sequence that displays some outstanding action or gameplay possibilities. Characters sliding while shooting in two places at once, before leaping and throwing knives in multiple directions to take out more bad guys. Supercar racers that hustle for position at the same time as dodging obstacles or crashed vehicles by mere inches. Horror-genre footage (usually displayed from firstperson) you watch as the protagonist runs from one horrifying situation to the next. Interest piqued.

Then what happens? The game director/producer/representative walks on stage, CGI preview finished, and talks up the game. Fair enough. But then they introduce the actual gameplay footage and most of the things you thought you could do in the game (thanks to the CGI intro literally shown minutes ago) have disappeared. You go from unbelievable expectations to hard-hitting reality in no time at all.

Videogames seem to get away with this practice. Can you imagine Marvel, having shown the Spider-Man Homecoming trailers, revealing the movie actually features a lad in Spidey pyjamas battling some plastic vultures? Or a popular band releasing a

fantastic single ahead of their album, but when you buy the album the other tracks are primary-school children playing Greensleeves?

The amount of money it costs to put these trailers together must be phenomenal. I'd prefer to see that cash invested in showing what I can do in a game and paying devs to make a game better, rather than being teased something that we all know won't see the light of day.

Russell Halford

They can't win, really. If it's not CGI trailers we're complaining about, it's scripted co-op banter or graphical downgrades. This year

Sony showed almost entirely gameplay footage, and people said it was boring. Perhaps they'll get it right next year—ah, who are we kidding.

A sting in the tail

Watching Microsoft's E3 conference reminded me of what it's like to hear a new record from your favourite '80s band: you hope past glories might be rekindled,

but you soon realise they've lost it.

Everyone came for Project Scorpio and left with shoulders sore from shrugging. Sure, this generation doesn't really feel like it's anywhere near ready to be over, but who doesn't love the excitement of a brand new console launch? Is the Xbox One X really all Microsoft had after teasing it for over a year? Does anyone other than PC owners get excited by teraflops and pixel density?

Still, there must be some cracking exclusive games coming, right? Hmm. It seems people are more excited about *Shadow Of The Colossus* being remade. Nintendo only had to show two minutes of *Mario* to get Game Of The Show.

I still don't understand how Microsoft has thrown it all away after the majesty of the Xbox 360. Its firstparty and exclusive line-up

"Everyone came for Project Scorpio and left with shoulders sore from shrugging"



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is shocking. Nintendo has shown how a new console can be shifted off the back of a single must-have game. Sony has had a stellar 12 months of exclusive classics. Microsoft has... well... *Forza*.

I get it – the mid-cycle upgrade is important. At some point, games will be made that only work on the PS4 Pro or Xbox One X, and backward compatibility locks in your users. But which sane PS4 owner is going to ditch their backlog to move to Microsoft's weedy line-up?

It's all about the games, Phil Spencer trumpeted, again. Ten years ago, Microsoft slapped down \$4 billion to save Xbox 360 from the Red Ring Of Death. Here's an idea. Why not put down the same amount to secure exclusive rights to *Red Dead Redemption 2* or the inevitable *GTAVP*? Because better exclusives are the only way I'm going to leave my PS4 behind.

Ivan Harding

Somehow we're not convinced even \$4 billion would turn Rockstar's head, but in any case it's the firstparty line-up, rather than thirdparty exclusives, that is Microsoft's main problem. We hope it's investing heavily behind the scenes. Endless *Forza*, *Gears* and *Halo* games won't put Xbox back on top by themselves.

Stop the press

This year's E3 was, for me, a crushing disappointment of a show. Nintendo arrived with a typically strong showing of previously announced firstparty games, teases of upcoming projects and some interesting thirdparty releases but, as a whole, E3 felt like a show that is at odds with how we consume games.

EA realised this last year; as a medium to showcase new games, E3 as we know it is dying. EA Play may take place around the same period, most likely out of fear of distancing itself too much from other publishers, but as a format it could take place at any point in the year.

The same could also be said for almost every E3 Nintendo Direct and Treehouse showcase over the last few years. Both Bethesda and Microsoft made the most of having a physical venue to shill their wares but very little about them felt revelatory – and the less said about Intel's presence at the PC Gaming Show, the better. Even Sony's generally strong E3 showing was little more than a YouTube playlist of trailers for, mostly, previously announced titles. In fact, I believe that only Ubisoft managed to embrace the E3 keynote format through its celebration of the culture, creativity and creators behind games. Ubisoft may have only shown a handful of truly interesting new games, but on the whole it felt like an event that could have taken place on a global stage like E3.

The reason for E3's decline, and why many publishers may be looking elsewhere, is because events like PlayStation Experience, Nintendo's roadshows, Gamescom and the PAX events all allow fans to go hands-on with games right away. They also fit neatly into the last-minute release-cycle hype where fans aren't left hanging for so long they become jaded or disappointed waiting for a release. It should come as no surprise that E3's organisers opened its doors to the public (albeit at a ludicrous price): some may say it was to help with falling revenues, but it's clear that finally they've realised that the industry isn't interested in attending press-only events anymore. In my opinion, that's the scariest thought to come out of this year's E3. Well, that and the fact that a remake of a 17-year-old game was my personal highlight of the entire show.

Vaughn Highfield

If anything, we expect the experience of opening E3 up to the public will have shown to platform holders and publishers that they still need traditional media events. It's not like the calendar isn't already teeming with plenty of fan-focused shows that are much better suited to flowing hordes of Joe Public.

Samus max

As usual E3 was fantastic. I think there was more respect for secrets this year as there seemed to be fewer leaks. If you had the *Shadow Of The Colossus* remake spoiled for you or knew about the Xbox price in advance then I've a suggestion for next year – stay away from sources of game news. At least until the last day!

Metroid: Samus Returns was the highlight for me and I only caught it live by pure chance. My wife is not a gamer and temporarily endured a lengthy post-E3 summary when I emerged from my media nest after the main Nintendo presentation had ended.

"Remember when I said I'd sell the Switch if Nintendo didn't announce *Metroid*?"

"Yes, dear."

"Well they flashed a logo for five seconds!"

I thoughtfully explained that this was both somehow exciting and disappointing at the same time and she nodded wistfully.

Later, as I passed the mancave entrance I saw the word '*Metroid*' briefly appear on a screen in a decorative, Star Trek-style font unfamiliar to me. It was clearly a different logo than the hastily copy-pasted *Prime 4* job I'd seen earlier, so I wandered closer and put on my headphones just as 3DS in-game graphics popped in.

I ran reeling to my ever-patient spouse, delighted not to be watching even a single additional in-game frame. Ironically all I wanted was *Metroid* footage to be shown; I didn't actually want to see it.

Stephen Mahon

At last, some positivity. While it's natural, and healthy, to be sceptical about the most overfunded event on the industry calendar, you can't deny that, at its best, there's nothing else like it. This was, on the whole, another great year – for *Metroid* fans especially. We hope your new PS Plus subscription yields enough games to tide you over until Nintendo deems that Samus is ready for primetime. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Videogames are now mature enough that some people are very invested in policing a certain aesthetic dogma, and woe betide any developer who sticks his or her head above the parapet and says something that is off-message. That, at least, is one tempting way to read an online kerfuffle that kicked off during E3, when David Cage annoyed the 'storytelling' crowd.

Interviewed by Kotaku about his new game, *Detroit: Become Human*, the very French developer of such notoriously French classics as *Mauve Forecast* and *Massive Drizzle* announced: "I don't want the game to have something to say, because I don't see myself delivering a message to people." 'OMG,' said the internet. What a terrible thing to say for someone who claims to be a storyteller. What a doofus. David Cage is nothing but a fraud and a terrible writer. He is 'fleeing from artistic responsibility'. He wants his work to 'say nothing'. And so on, and so tediously outraged.

This was interesting, because contrary to what the self-appointed experts on storytelling appear to think, many great writers of literature have also explicitly disavowed the idea that their work is intended to deliver a message. The reason, when you think about it, is simple. If you want to deliver a message, why not just write down that message? Why go to all the trouble of writing a massive fiction, of creating an extraordinarily complex world full of contradictory characters? What a silly waste of time that would be. Just publish your message in the classified ads in a newspaper. Or carve it into a wall.

And this goes just as much for a game about robots as it does for a play about the intersection of grief and the intellect, or a novel about South American buccaneering. It's not that Cage denied he was telling a story: he even went to the trouble of describing what his story was about. "The story I'm telling is really about androids," Cage said. "They're discovering emotions and



To insist that art send a message is to reduce it to the level of postcard, or propaganda

wanting to be free. If people want to see parallels with this or that, that's fine with me. But my story's about androids who want to be free."

It becomes almost comically difficult to understand why Cage was singled out for criticism when he went on to specify exactly how he thought he could write a story about androids even though he didn't want to send a message. "I'm definitely interested in asking questions to the player," Cage pointed out. "Questions that are meaningful and that resonate with him as a person and a citizen. We live in a world that's full of hopes as well

as fears. Fears about the present and also the future. Where are we going? What's going to happen? I just want to ask these questions and see how people react."

This all seems perfectly reasonable to me. The brilliant TV adaptation of *Westworld*, for example — which, by sheer coincidence, was also about androids who want to be free — worked in exactly the same way: it asked such questions, but didn't seem to me to be sending any particular 'message' to the viewers. Similarly with the classic Isaac Asimov short stories about androids (or 'positronic robots') written from the 1940s to the 1970s: they explore fascinating ethical dilemmas in situations where the apparently rational Three Laws of Robotics turn out to conflict, but they don't send a message in the form of easy answers. To insist that art send a message, indeed, is to reduce it to the level of postcard, or propaganda.

Personally I am no especial fan of David Cage's QTE-festooned games to date, and I do not expect his new game to rival Asimov or *Westworld* as a dramatic exploration of questions about androids who want to be free. But that's not really the point. Cage is one of those eccentric visionaries who adorn the medium even — or especially — when we disagree with them. We need the weirdos, the dreamers, or everyone would just be making *Call Of Duty* games. (Which would be nearly fine by me if they ever resurrected the Spec Ops local co-op mode.)

As loyal readers may recollect, I don't even think that videogames are mainly, or even very competently, a 'storytelling' medium in the first place, but it would be tedious for me to rehearse here my reasons for saying that. I insist nevertheless that David Cage has the right to make stories in whatever way that he wants to make them. That way the possibilities of the medium may advance. And one day I might actually like one of them.

Steven Poole's *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Sadly, I never went to E3 during print's heyday. I was still in school for most of the '90s, and spent the back half of the decade shirking every responsibility going so I could play *GoldenEye* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* with the curtains closed. During the 2000s, when the tide really turned from print to online, I was making terrible life decisions such as 'having a respectable career' and 'earning reasonable money'. It was only in 2009, after one proper-job redundancy too many, that I opted to change career; and so it was only in 2013, with even online media struggling to stay relevant against the rise of video, that I first hopped on a plane to Los Angeles for the greatest videogame show on Earth. This year's E3 was my fifth, and every year it gets weirder and weirder for people who make magazines.

It starts as soon as you bowl up to the convention centre to register. You're lined up with people who are, at best, bearing printouts of their bylined online work, and at worst, just reading out the URLs of their video channels. I, meanwhile, whip out two copies of an actual magazine with words and pictures in it and everything, then flip between the pages that have my name on, showing my passport and business card to back it all up. The lad next to me just had to show the staff a video of him gurning while opening *FIFA* card packs, and off he went with his badge. As someone who, in the year 2017, still takes vinyl records to DJ gigs, I am comfortable enough with this. But the girl on the other side of the counter looked at me like I'd just travelled through time from the 1800s. In retrospect, the monocle and pocket watch may not have helped.

Then it's off to the press conferences, where boys with mad angular haircuts and girls dressed like new *Overwatch* skins vlog in the queue while I sweat and tut in the background. Inside, the website folk write stories in realtime and the video kids Snapchat reaction GIFs while I scribble disconsolately in a notebook (seriously!) with



Technology moves fast, so it's natural that the needs and habits of the people that cover it do the same

a pencil (I know!). Later, when the explosions stop and the lights go up, I will ask someone young and trustworthy to explain Snapchat to me. I still don't get it. Something to do with cats, I think.

Then the show doors open, and with each passing year the changes become more and more apparent. Most journos at E3 this year were complaining about the effect that opening the doors to the public was having on them getting to appointments with anything remotely resembling punctuality. It was a nightmare, sure, but so was the extent to which I had to weave and duck out of the

way of people speaking to camera, since apparently if you make YouTube videos you become instantly immune to the concept of inconvenience. And the flooding hordes of the hoi polloi would have been much easier to navigate had they not all been Facebook Live-ing the whole thing on their phones.

When I finally get in to play a game, a handler shows me where to hook up my capture gear. I point to my temples and say, "It's all in here"; they laugh, then realise I'm genuine, and look away nervously. Later on I'll ask for a minimum of six screenshots and headshots of all speakers and they will look at me as if I just rolled up on a penny farthing and asked who won the Great War. Such is the life of the print journo in 2017.

None of this is a complaint. I have long since reconciled myself to the fact that I am, if only in relative terms, ancient, and will only grow more so. Plus, I find E3's year-on-year changes oddly fascinating. Technology moves fast, so it's natural that the needs and habits of the people that cover it do the same. And once I get in a room with developers, it's all worth it – because while they might not admit it, they love dealing with print. They don't have to fret about how they look or sound, because we're not pointing a camera at them. They needn't be too careful with what they say, because they know we're not just looking for a quick headline. There's a wonderful flash on people's faces when they see **Edge** on my badge. We might not have the numbers, but we still matter more than most.

On the way out, as I swing by the media lounge to bogart the Wi-Fi, I see panic and exhaustion all around me. Writers bashing out news stories. Producers editing footage or staring, pained, at static progress bars. I stroll out, head down the escalator, and leave the building; my business is with a very different sort of bar. I have three weeks to write everything up, after all.

Nathan Brown is Edge's editor. If you discount all the time travelling back and forth, he is technically 872 years old

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#309



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SPIDER-MAN

Developer Insomniac Games Publisher SIE Format PS4 Release 2018

Much of the appeal of Marvel's friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man comes from his personality – the sense that, like most of us, he's making things up as he goes along. Insomniac's version of the hero, however, looks positively professional.

Sony's behind-closed-doors E3 demos are normally intended to dig a little deeper into a game's press-conference showing, but our second viewing of *Spider-Man* is almost indistinguishable from the first. This is a Spider-Man who, by age 23, has found all eight of his implied feet,

boasting mastery over his movements unless the script demands otherwise. At its best, Insomniac's game is fluid and improvisational, the stuff of our web-flinging dreams. But it's nothing we haven't seen before – both in the press-conference demo, and Rocksteady's *Batman* games.

Parker spends much of the demo stalking through a warehouse, putting down Wilson Fisk's bemasked goons with a stealthy toolset which, spurts of sticky webbing aside, plays out exactly like an *Arkham* game. Combat itself is a brawl of canned combos and counters,



We don't doubt Insomniac's ability to make New York a playground; *Sunset Overdrive's* open-world traversal was great, though we could do without its bland mission design

punctuated by flashy contextual takedowns. It's an effective system in Rocksteady's work: Batman is, after all, a bruiser by trade. Spider-Man's all about the locomotion, though, and we want to see it.

So when our demo transitions to open-air web-slinging, we sit up – but not for long, as the action plays out exactly as it had on Sony's stage. Chasing Fisk's helicopter, Spidey crashes through all the same signs, swings from all the same corners and bashes through the requisite QTEs. This is one of only a handful of linear, story-led missions, we're told, and we'll spend the vast majority of the final game in complete control of our actions. So why show the game in this unflattering light? We trust Insomniac to nail the movement system, but the glossy auto-action on show here has us worried that things may stray too far into the cinematic to feel authentic.

Insomniac assures us that things won't always run so smoothly, however. There will be repercussions for missed QTEs (the hilariously exaggerated fail-state faceplants of *Spider-Man 3* live in infamy), although whether they'll extend beyond small stumbles or bland checkpoint reloads isn't made clear. It's even suggested that we'll spend some time playing as Parker without the Spider suit, which we think was meant as a positive.

But with the most exciting part of the game – that signature web-slinging – relegated to just a minute or so of what we're shown, it's difficult to get a sense of the true game behind the shiny mask. It's not that we don't want to feel like a superhero. We just hope Insomniac knows we want our improvisational, free-flinging, fallible Peter Parker – not simply Bruce Wayne with webs.



DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

Developer Quantic Dream Publisher SIE Format PS4 Release TBA

Quantic Dream is quick to wave away the suggestion that *Detroit: Become Human's* tale of race-based slavery might be in any way, you know, political. Eyebrows all over E3 shot up when auteur David Cage said his dystopian android thriller wouldn't deliver a message. Associate game director **Gregorie Diaconu** backs him up: "We are not trying to have an agenda," he tells us.

"The thing is, we started making *Detroit* a few years ago," he adds. He points out that Quantic's 2012 tech demo, *Kara*, was the game's true genesis. "We try to be very sincere – stay true to each character, let you make your own decisions and reach your own conclusions about what it is exactly to live in that kind of world."

At first, we balk at what seems like calculated shirking. But it's understandable in a way: there is a difference, after all, between something being implied and inferred. Yet the inference is inevitable. Yes, Cage and team brought *Kara* to life before Black Lives Matter came to prominence. But the android/human question has always had racial connotations, and the game actively invokes them at times. Either way, Cage has had plenty of time to come up with a better line than simply pretending the link doesn't exist.

Still, away from the fuss, there's a videogame. We're shown a riot scene, which features dark-skinned android Markus, one of *Detroit's* several playable characters. He's accompanied by North, a militant

female android who believes violence "is the only language humans understand" and is fully in favour of a few well-placed molotovs. We must advance the protest and free our fellow androids, our complex sense of morality represented by a rather simple meter that swings between Violent and Pacifist.

We choose to tag buildings with holo-graffiti rather than smashing windows, so our needle tilts towards Pacifist (some tags overtly link the game to real-world civil-rights struggles: "We have a dream" is actually one of the *less* cringeworthy slogans). Keen to show off the flexibility of choice, Diaconu has Markus and North flip cars for us. Later, we plant a cyber-flag on a bandstand, a choice that would not appear had we decided to set the structure on fire earlier. Consequence will, we're told, radiate throughout the game. North is disappointed in our (mostly) peaceful protest, and we're told it'll impact our relationship. But regardless of our chosen tack, the riot scene ends with a mass shooting of androids.

While we're left overwhelmed by this hands-off demo, playing through the hostage scenario shown behind closed doors at last year's show is gripping. Selecting Connor's evidence-based dialogue options causes a percentage chance of success to fluctuate, so every choice carries immediate weight. We exhale, relieved, after we finish – a very different kind of sigh to the one that leaves us after that riot scene.

Eyebrows shot up when auteur David Cage said his dystopian android thriller wouldn't deliver a message



HIDDEN AGENDA

Developer Supermassive Games **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Release** TBA

No studio had a busier E3 than Supermassive Games, but *Hidden Agenda* might just be the pick of the Guildford studio's litter. Using Sony's new Playlink initiative, which uses a smartphone app for local social play, the game casts up to four players as both team-mates and opponents: you'll take critical decisions together, but might occasionally be given the opportunity to screw over the others for your own benefit. The *Until Dawn* formula is a fine fit for local multiplayer – Supermassive says *Hidden Agenda* was partly inspired by YouTube videos of people playing its notionally singleplayer adventure in groups. Once again every character can die as a result of your decisions and actions, including the detective and district attorney who serve as protagonists. Playlink may have been primarily designed to expand PS4's reach beyond the traditional crowd, but on this evidence the service offers plenty to experienced hands, too.



KNACK II

Developer SIE Japan Studio **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Release** September 5

Poor Mark Cerny. The chief system architect of PlayStation 4, who helped devise the checkerboard-rendering solution that meant PS4 Pro could achieve 4K on a budget, couldn't even get his new game on Sony's E3 stage. For all that PS4 launch title *Knack* has become a running joke, its sequel is a rare commodity: a firstparty PlayStation game that will be on shelves this year. You'd have thought its publisher might have been able to spare it 90 seconds of stage time, if only out of respect for its creator. Especially because – whisper it – it actually looks OK. *Knack II* has *God Of War*'s writer and appears to have borrowed its combat template too, with a super move affording our hero two swords for a spell of Kratos-style whirling combat. Parries, charge moves, and abilities that are only available in co-op further broaden the scope of a game that looks to have more in its locker than its predecessor – even if that's damning with faint praise.



UNCHARTED: THE LOST LEGACY

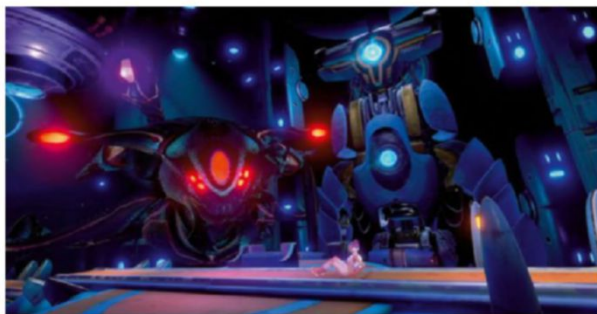
Developer Naughty Dog **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** August 22

True to its word, Naughty Dog isn't bringing back Nathan Drake for one last, archaeologically devastating hurrah. Chloe Frazer makes for a convincing enough replacement, though. In this hefty standalone expansion, we watch her pulling off all the usual moves in her search for the legendary Tusk Of Ganesh: yanking guards over ledges, sneaking through grass, sliding from pillar to post to avoid gunfire and generally running her mouth. *Uncharted* fans, rest easy – Drake may be gone, but his template endures.

Not that there isn't room for a few characteristic set-piece surprises: our demo ends with an armoured jeep bursting through the wall Frazer is climbing. The owner of said jeep is Asav, a power-hungry mercenary also seeking the Tusk. We're

on familiar ground, then, but *The Lost Legacy* deviates from the formula a little. Rather than telling another story about Nathan Drake, this is about a double act, and an all-female one at that: Frazer is paired up with *Uncharted 4*'s Nadine Ross.

That said, there's little sign of the kind of co-ordinated melee attack we saw in the reveal trailer, Nadine even taking on two men solo at one point despite Chloe's suggestions otherwise. We're promised this scenario can play out differently, but on this evidence *The Lost Legacy* seems unlikely to deviate too much from *Uncharted 4*'s core systems. Regardless, we're looking forward to learning more about two rather underserved characters in what looks set to be a consolatory parting gift for anyone struggling to say goodbye.



STAR CHILD

Developer Playful Corp **Publisher** GameTrust
Format PS4, PSVR **Release** TBA

While Rift launch title *Lucky's Tale* had plenty of problems, its use of VR was not among them. Viewing the action from a shifting thirdperson perspective helped elevate it from a bland cartoon platformer to – well, a bland cartoon platformer that felt somewhat novel because it was in VR. Developer Playful is hoping to repeat the trick with *Star Child*. It's a galaxy apart from *Lucky's Tale*, but its inspirations are similarly obvious, despite the sci-fi set dressing. Rather than call back to the '90s, here it's the new breed of 2.5D platformers, and particularly *Inside*, that lays the foundation. Unimaginative, perhaps, but the pedigree's there: director Kynan Pearson has credits on the likes of *Metroid Prime*, *Halo* and the *Shadow Of The Colossus* remake. We're hardly expecting a classic, but the side-on view offers up scope for plenty of perspective-based trickery in VR – although an option to play without a headset means the designers may have to rein themselves in. Still, at least there's no sign of that stupid fox.



MONSTER OF THE DEEP: FINAL FANTASY XV

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PSVR **Release** September

Or, if we may, *Square Enix Batshit Fishing*. The publisher's post-launch support for *Final Fantasy XV* has been commendable, and varied – recent updates have added thirdperson shooting stages and free-roaming, off-road driving, while the forthcoming *Comrades* expansion will offer fourplayer co-op. It seems Square Enix intends to, slowly but surely, turn *Final Fantasy XV* into the everygame, containing every genre and gameplay mechanic known to man. It's an interesting experiment, you must admit. That's at least one of the more plausible explanations for *Monster Of The Deep*, a VR-powered mix of *Sega Bass Fishing* with *FFXV*'s matey central foursome and hideous aquatic bestiary. Details are thin on the ground, but really, there's little more to say. This is *FFXV*'s fishing minigame reborn in a VR headset through the lens of a Sega arcade classic; you can eat the daily catch around the fire with Noctis and co; it looks absolutely ridiculous, and you can colour us weirdly, guiltily intrigued.



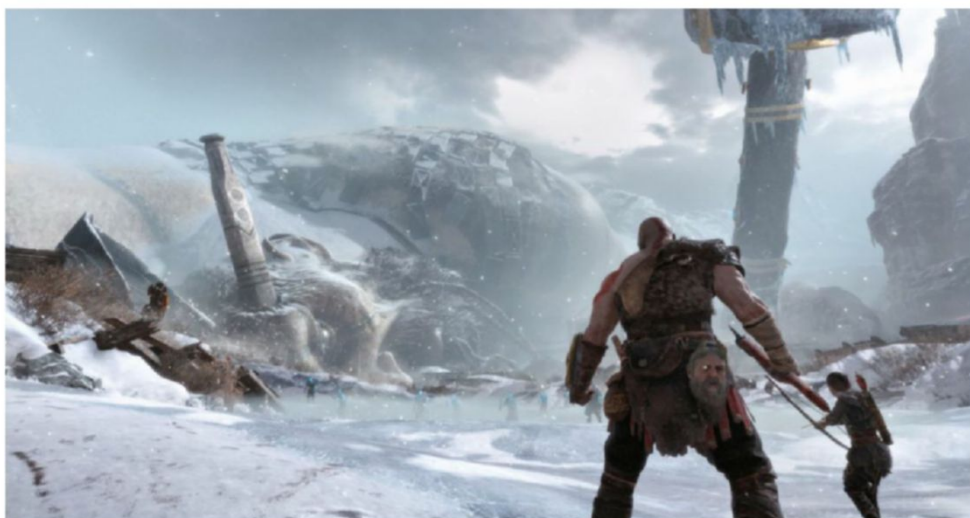
SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Developer Bluepoint Games **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** 2018

Sony is unlikely to ever repeat the remarkable three-hit combo of its press conference of E3 2015, when *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, *Shenmue III* and *The Last Guardian* took the game industry's annual festival of hype to an unprecedented peak. This remaster, while rumoured in the run-up to the show – and mangled through Chinese whispers to be a sequel, rather than a remake – was as close as Sony got to wet-dream wish fulfilment at E3 2017. Fumito Ueda's shonkiest game is to finally get the technical execution its design ideas have always deserved, courtesy of remaster specialist Bluepoint Games.

It's certainly in good hands. Bluepoint's CV includes some of the best remakes around: the Texas studio was behind the

Metal Gear Solid and *Uncharted* collections, ported *Titanfall* to 360 and *Gravity Rush* to PS4, and has previous with Ueda's work, having remastered *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* for PS3. This is no rush job, we're told, but a ground-up rebuild: Sony has tasked Bluepoint with making all-new assets for the game. There'll also be an overhaul – optional, we assume – to the original's, um, idiosyncratic button layout. The E3 trailer looks too good to be true at times, admittedly, and perhaps we should be worried that the most exciting announcement of Sony's E3 is 12 years old. But there is no game more deserving of such a remake, and no finer studio to do it. If the finished product looks this good, we'll be in heaven.

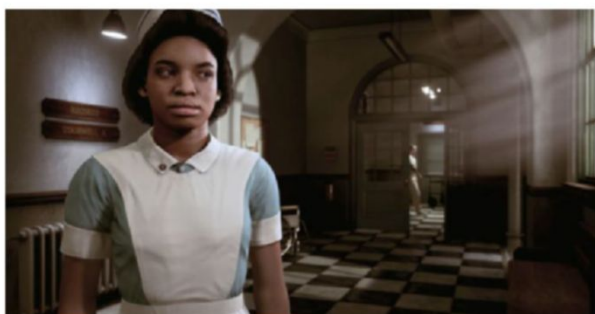


GOD OF WAR

Developer SIE Santa Monica Studio **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** Early 2018

This year's E3 hardly lacked for the influence of *The Last Of Us* and *Dark Souls*, but nowhere were those two inspirations more coherent, than in Kratos' latest outing. The father/son relationship that lies at the core of the new *God Of War* may not be especially convincing after Kratos' long, wearying history as the biggest empathy vacuum in videogames, but by insisting that our hero's offspring, Atreus, will be more asset than burden, creative director Cory Barlog continues to make all the right noises. In addition to helping out in combat, Atreus will act as translator, since Kratos cannot speak the language of his new Norse homeland. And the prospect of the two sharing a progression curve throws up some interesting, if absurd, decisions: shall we make you a better hunter, my son, or should Daddy learn that sweet new juggle combo?

The *Souls* nod comes from the combat, and the new, close-in camera angle, though Kratos is capable of levels of brutal spectacle that would make even Artorias The Abysswalker blush. Expect plenty of canned kill animations among the magic-infused blows, launchers and parries, though there's even a little dynamism to the scripted moments: at one point Kratos mistimes a dodge, and the resulting hit sends him spinning through the air, the camera angle shifting to frame it like a cutscene. When, late on, we're introduced to the World Serpent – snarling, snorting, speaking in a language only Atreus can parse – it's impossible not to think of Kingseeker Frampt, if he was massive, terrifying and in 4K. For once it's not quite fair to call it a *Dark Souls* reference. Jörmungandr has been around a bit longer, after all.



THE INPATIENT

Developer Supermassive Games **Publisher** SIE
Format PSVR **Release** TBA

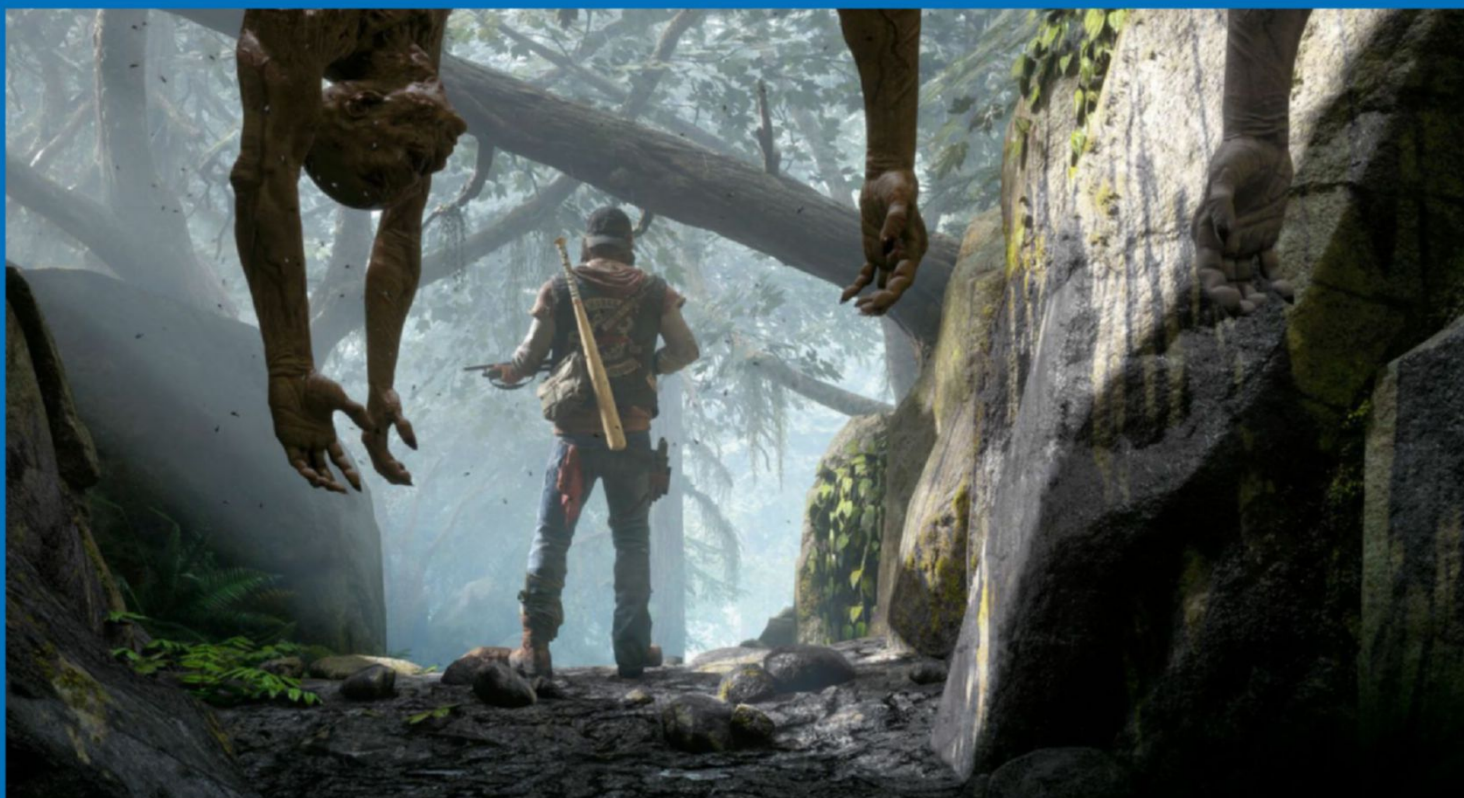
First came campy teen slasher *Until Dawn*, then PSVR horror-coaster spin-off *Rush Of Blood* – yet Supermassive still isn't done with the scares. It's back to the butterfly effect for *The Inpatient*, a psychological horror set 60 years before the events of *Until Dawn* in the Blackwood Sanatorium asylum in which Supermassive's BAFTA-winning horror was partially set. If it doesn't sound terribly original, that's because it isn't. Our demo soon reveals the triple whammy of amnesiac protagonist, flashbacks and cheap (but effective) jump scares. Dialogue choices are made using head-tracking controls, with key decisions leading to different outcomes at the end of the three-hour runtime. There's a glimmer of proper dread when our left 'leg' is punctured by a syringe – but it's not the first time we've had something stabbed into our thigh in VR. Capcom's *Kitchen* demo still gives us nightmares; hopefully Supermassive has something new to bring to *Resident Evil 7*'s heaving table of virtual-reality horrors.



BRAVO TEAM

Developer Supermassive Games **Publisher** SIE
Format PSVR **Release** 2017

Farpoint may have come and gone, but your new PlayStation Aim controller isn't quite ready for the attic just yet, thanks to Supermassive Games' cheerily safe military shooter. Abrupt shifts in perspective jar at first: pressing X auto-runs our soldier in thirdperson to cover, where we snap back into firstperson to fire over cars and through windows. But as we make our way across the bridge with our co-op partner, we're soon convinced of the system's elegance. VR footwork is at best functional and at worst nauseating, so semi-automatic movement lets us enjoy simply aiming down sights and pulling triggers without rooting us to the spot, as many other VR shooters do. Voice chat feels optional rather than a necessity, and while a thumbstick flick performs a quick 180, we never need it in a level that takes the phrase 'corridor shooter' and auto-runs with it. Currently it feels more like a proof of concept than a finished product; hopefully the final game will test more than just the steadiness of our aim.



DAYS GONE

Developer SIE Bend Studio Publisher SIE Format PS4 Release 2018

Behind closed doors, the day really is gone. While SIE Bend's press-conference showing had protagonist Deacon St John assault an enemy camp in broad daylight, here a studio rep plays through the same section at night. Where the public demo took place in blazing sunshine, here St John pads through the driven snow. And while previously he'd lured a swarm of infected (here styled 'freakers') to clear out the settlement, this second playthrough has St John work largely from the shadows. On stage, the mutant swarm made for another convincing showcase of Bend's remarkable flowing crowd technology. Behind closed doors, the studio intends to highlight how dynamic weather can affect the way a given section plays out, and to show off St John's other, more personal methods for dealing with the enemy. Unfortunately, it's nothing we haven't seen before.

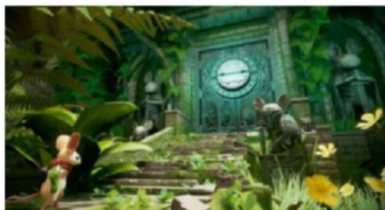
In fact, that's putting it mildly. On this evidence, *Days Gone* has barely a single idea to call its own, with St John's ability set magpied from other, better games, and a lingering suspicion that it may even have borrowed the tech to power it. Hand-to-hand combat, for example, is all but indistinguishable from the system employed in *Uncharted 4*, with some very Naughty Dog-like animation blending. An on-the-fly crafting mechanic (arrows, of course, and heavens above, molotov cocktails) riffs suspiciously heavily on *The Last Of Us* – a game that clearly informed much of Sony's

E3 line-up, admittedly, but here the comparison is an especially unflattering one. *Days Gone*'s debt ledger extends beyond the Sony Worldwide Studios network, too, with a tracking mechanic that plays out indistinguishably similarly to Geralt of Rivia's *Witcher Senses*. There's even a bullet-time system in there, for heaven's sake.

All of which seems to imply that St John is some kind of mutant superhero, but we're told he's nothing more than a regular guy, albeit one better equipped to deal with the mutant onslaught by virtue of his past in a biker gang. His motorcycle is, we're assured, a vital component of a game whose protagonist works without alliance, drifting from place to place, employing his pilfered toolset as he sees fit. If the bike runs out of fuel, it will be out of action until you find more. If it's damaged, you'll need to fix it using scrap that you scavenge out in the world.

It is, at least, a reasonably original idea in a game that badly needs them. Rare indeed is the open-world game that insists we stick to a single vehicle – even those that put you on horseback break the rules with their teleporting steeds. This demo was intended to show off all the things Deacon St John can do when he isn't tricking floods of mutated freakers into doing his dirty work, as if to reassure us that there's more to *Days Gone* than its remarkable crowd tech. We leave, if anything, more worried than we were before.

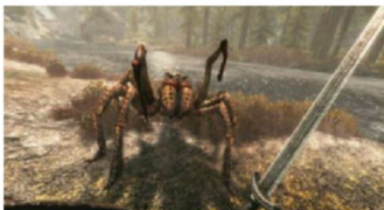
It barely has a single idea to call its own, with St John's ability set magpied from other, better games



MOSS

Developer Polyarc **Publisher** SIE
Format PSVR **Release** TBA

Talk about small fry. Tucked away in the slim selection of PSVR titles revealed at Sony's conference was this charming fairytale platformer. Turn the pages of an interactive book, and the story unfolds: one day, a mouse named Quill finds a magical stone that summons you – her guardian angel. Standard thirdperson platforming controls feel familiar, but you'll need to reach into the world with your omnipotent, motion-controlled touch to move objects and lower bridges to grant Quill safe passage. You rely on each other's abilities, facing and overcoming challenges that the developers hope will foster an emotional connection between player and protagonist. Really, we're just excited that this new breed of platformer could be coming into its own – the likes of *Robot Rescue* have showed you don't have to be springing around in firstperson to feel immersed in virtual reality. A quietly intriguing highlight of PSVR's second E3.



SKYRIM VR

Developer/publisher Bethesda
Format PSVR **Release** November

Yes, *again*. But this time, in virtual reality, as Bethesda aims to grant every Dragon-shouting *Elder Scrolls* fan their ultimate wish: transporting them into a fully explorable, VR-enabled *Skyrim*. And, at first, the possibilities captivate. This will be a complete version of the beloved RPG, we're told, with the vast province recreated and all quests available. But with each teleport forward, disappointment looms. An up-close, firstperson view does the 2011-era textures no favours. Turning requires blind presses of the Move controller's miniscule face buttons. The clunkiness of throwing fireballs or swinging blades endears somewhat; less agreeable is aiming an arrow effectively, or having to enter a fiddly menu to switch weapons mid-fight. Elegant it is not, but while there are myriad ways to revisit *Skyrim* these days, none will put you so close to the action. That, Bethesda hopes, will be worth all the gold in Tamriel to some.



MATTERFALL

Developer Housemarque **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Release** 15 August

We've seen some misleading cinematic trailers in our time, but *Matterfall's* effort might take top prize. Featuring a masked sci-fi warrior shooting enemies to shards in a futuristic cityscape, the 2015 Paris Games Week teaser enthralled. Was this Housemarque branching out into the FPS? Well, no. Two years of radio silence later, and 2D action-platformer *Matterfall* suddenly appears at Sony's E3 booth. We spot elements from the abstract reveal trailer: materialising and dematerialising platforms; thundering spider tanks spraying screen-filling bullets; showers of crimson voxels. Inevitably, it's Housemarque-smooth. What's more, with enemy-freezing dash abilities and blaster shots galore, there's *Metroid* and *Mega Man* in its DNA. The controls confuse somewhat and the art design is dated, but after all that mixed messaging, we're pleased to see *Matterfall* manifest in its true form, and an accomplished one at that.



HORIZON ZERO DAWN: THE FROZEN WILDS

Developer Guerrilla Games **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** 2017

There can be few greater signs of how things have changed chez Sony this generation than the debut trailer for *Horizon Zero Dawn's* first DLC expansion. In years past, the sight of the Guerrilla Games logo on Sony's E3 stage would have resulted in a polite ripple of apathy for the announcement of a new *Killzone* and, in 18 months or so, another *Edge 7*. Yet *Horizon* was the firstparty standard bearer in what was a remarkable first few months of 2017 on PS4. And in the absence of much else to get excited about on Sony's console for the rest of this year, an excuse to dive back in to one of the finest open worlds around is not to be sniffed at.

Moving *Horizon's* action to the frozen north is, in fairness, quite the elevator pitch: who can resist the notion of a 4K

Skyrim with robot dinosaurs? Details are, in accordance with Sony's E3 house style, somewhat thin on the ground: Guerrilla boss Hermen Hulst assures us the DLC will be both "beefy" and "chunky"; it will take Aloy beyond the mountains that block off the base game's northern border; it will introduce a new tribe, the Banuk, a hardy people well equipped to live in the bitter, brutal cold. That may hint at a greater emphasis on survival mechanics than the vanilla game, though it's likely the new setting will be used less as an excuse for Guerrilla to expand the mechanical template, and more as a way of nodding even more overtly to the likes of *Skyrim* and *Game Of Thrones*. If there's not a fight against a robotic dragon, for instance, we'll be surprised – and a little disappointed.



If sailing to shore doesn't appeal, you can always travel there by cannon, though you'll need a crewmate to change trajectory

SEA OF THIEVES

Developer Rare Publisher Microsoft Studios Format Xbox One Release 2018

Navigating our way to the Microsoft booth this year is easy: we simply have to follow the laughter. Chuckling groups stagger away from it in droves, telling tall tales of their time at sea. Clearly much has changed in the last 12 months. Sailing the seven seas at last year's E3 was a delight soured only by the lingering question of what else there was to do in *Sea Of Thieves*. But this time, our demo is packed with possibilities: treasure to hunt, riddles to solve and chunky little blunderbusses to fire at skeletons. At some point, we

might even get around to them. Simply boarding the ship is an uproarious struggle: our crewmates find a barrel of grog and the inevitable happens, the arc of our stagger now wider than the jetty leading to our ship. Once we've sobered up, dried off and got on board, a crewmate holds up a map and flips it round to show the others, like a proud toddler with a crayon drawing.

We run aground on rocks, and water pours in: a couple of us plug the holes, another begins to bail us out, the fourth adjusts the sails to



put us back on course, and the Rare staffer assigned to us struggles to keep it together as our group offers up enough innuendo to power a Carry On film. Seafaring controls are agreeably simple; the difficulty comes from the need for teamwork and communication, the comedy from the slapstick results of failure.

The treasure hunt begins. Ours is a good old-fashioned 'X marks the spot' job, but there are also riddles, procedurally generated based on a given location's topography and scenery. We'd have preferred the latter, to be honest, as our group, heading towards the rocky outcrop at an island's easternmost point, starts digging around a likely spot in the sand. When a shovel finally hits the wooden thunk of a treasure chest, it's not satisfying in the way that solving cryptic clues

would have been. Still, we lug our haul back on board, and are pleased with our lot, though concerns linger. Chiefly, what is it all *for*? Are we working towards an ultimate goal, or are we meant to sail the seven seas, looting and pillaging indefinitely?

Yet this is a much-improved showing for a game that has previously struggled to make a convincing case for its own existence, and when it all comes together – in those moments of spontaneous coordination that make it feel like you've been with your crew for years – *Sea Of Thieves* is a delight. The potential to create your own ridiculous legends is there. As the game enters its final months of development, Rare still has plenty of questions to answer. But even without sight of the full map, it's already looking like something to be treasured.



FORZA MOTORSPORT 7

Developer Turn 10 Studios **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** Xbox One **Release** October 3

Heat waves ripple over shimmering asphalt, sandy residue coats headlights in splotches, and there's not a jagged edge in sight, unless you count the harsh angles of sun-bleached cliffs surrounding new track Dubai Autodrome. Turn 10's car sim spearheads the launch of Xbox One X for a reason. It perfectly showcases the platform's strengths, with 4K resolution at 60FPS and HDR lighting as rich as the premium you'll pay to see it.

After *Forza Horizon 3*'s off-road escapade last year, the return to fixed circuit racing focuses your senses on the temperament of your vehicle rather than whose garden you're veering into. Handling's certainly grippier, given it takes place exclusively on tarmac. But don't take your eyes off the road. Dynamic weather draws fresh beauty from courses we've lapped hundreds of times, such as Mugello, Nürburgring, and so on.

During a circuit race in our Nismo Motul Autech GTR we watch threatening grey clouds group ominously on the horizon before making their approach. A light trickle peppers our screen like the first drops from a ketchup bottle before quickly settling into the groove of a torrential downpour. 2160p rainfall is a sight to see. The slightly more zoomed-in cockpit view puts us close to droplets so sharply rendered as to resemble thousands of pin pricks, each taking turns to catch the wind and

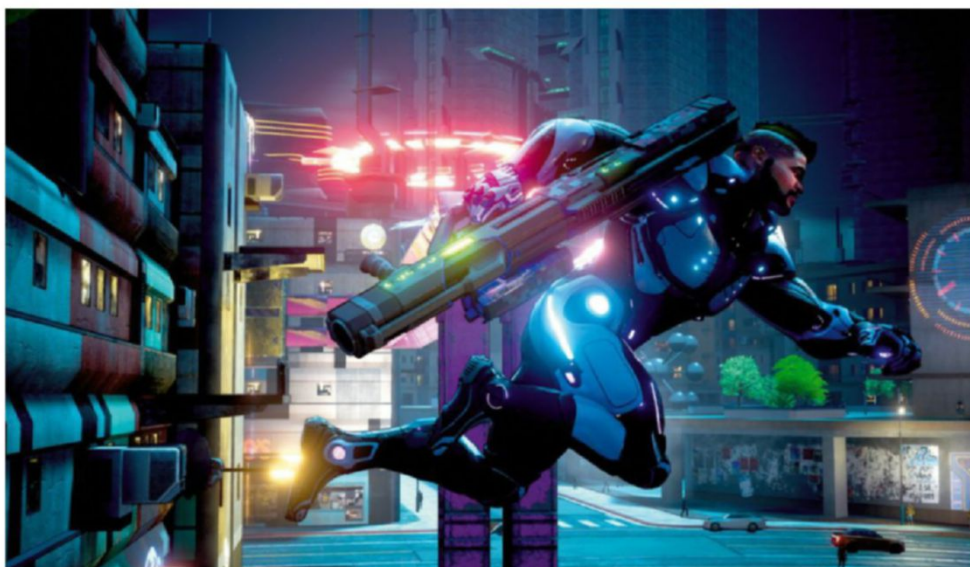
stream up our windshield. It's – sorry in advance – a new high-water mark for driving games.

These conditions impact your vehicle. Tarmac temperatures affect tyre friction, for example, and realtime puddles swell in showers. As a result, hydroplaning becomes a danger during waterlogged stretches of track. Meanwhile, mirrors and windshield wipers jolt in direct response to dips and divots in terrain, window netting ripples violently as the wind whips through it, and throttled engines are accompanied by the worrying rattles of loose screws (or possibly glovebox Maltesers). *Forza 7* moves just as nicely as it looks.

Despite the authenticity, this is far from an inaccessible car sim. There's real effort to cater for all skill levels in, for instance, a new friction assist that allows you to adjust the speed penalty for hitting sand or gravel, and an open campaign offering six championships to hop between as you get your fill of trophy trucks, pre-war motors, exotic high-enders, American muscle, and NASCAR's finest. A 700-strong car list dwarfs *Forza 6*'s roster.

Realism doesn't have to be punishing. It can refer to the subtle nicks in your driver's helmet, the spray from soaked tyres, or the groggy thud of a gearstick. That *Forza 7*'s advances are mostly visual in nature means that the Xbox One X's standard-bearer, like the console itself, is something of a luxury.

The return to fixed circuit racing focuses your senses on the temperament of your vehicle



CRACKDOWN 3

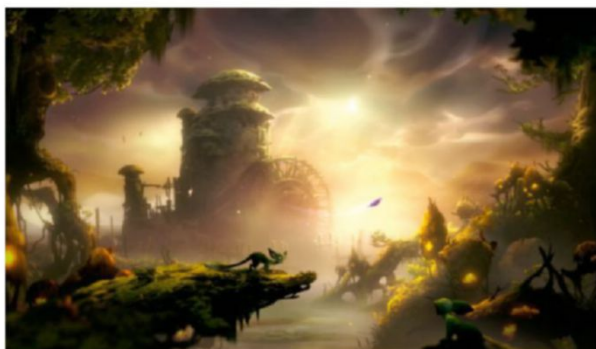
Developer Reagent Games, Sumo Digital **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** November 7

So it *does* still exist. *Crackdown 3* was announced at Microsoft's conference three years ago, and we were beginning to worry it had met a similar fate to some of the games with which it shared a stage that day. *Fable Legends*, *Scalebound* and *Phantom Dust* have all since been cancelled, and given how long *Crackdown 3* has been in the shadows, we worried it would be next. Not so: it was here, it was playable, and it'll be out before Christmas.

Concerns persist, however. This is the singleplayer portion of the game, developed by Sumo Digital and, because it's playable offline, shorn of the eye-catching, cloud-powered destruction that turned heads when *Crackdown 3* was unveiled. Stripped of its apparent USP, the game loses much of its allure; the concept of an open-world game in which you

have superpowers no longer feels so novel, and from a distance you might mistake it for a new *Saints Row*.

Still, there's plenty here to like. The star is still the core progression loop: you jump high to collect an orb which makes you jump higher, and so on. Traversal options have been expanded to include a double-jump and air-dash. And there are some creative weapon designs, including the delightful Singularity, which fires out a small forcefield that sucks in nearby enemies and objects before blowing them all up at once. In a way *Crackdown 3* can't win. When it was announced, its multiplayer's always-online requirement was criticised; now we've played the singleplayer, we're pining for its online mode. In the context of its cancelled stablemates, however, perhaps its mere survival is victory enough.



ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

Developer Moon Studios **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

This came as little surprise given the success of *Ori And The Blind Forest*, but did they *have* to name it after a 1980s TV show whose TV-faced antagonist still gives us the willies? Perhaps it's an appropriate choice for the sequel to a game whose ethereal Gareth Coker score and Ghibli-style whimsy belied some often infuriatingly punishing level design, which was only mildly tempered by the ability to drop your own respawn point on the fly. Expect more of the same here, albeit in 4K with HDR support on PC and Xbox One X – though if Moon Studios hasn't learned its lesson, and gives us another hair-tearingly difficult level like the original's Ginso Tree section, there'll be hell to pay.



CUPHEAD

Developer Studio MDHR Entertainment **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format Xbox One **Release** September 29

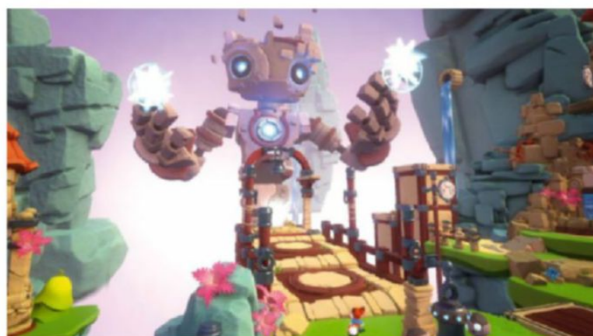
Three years after its debut on Microsoft's stage and with development on the game now well into its seventh year, the end is almost in sight for *Cuphead*: it will, we're assured, be finally with us soon. The game has had an awkward history at E3: non-playable the year it was announced, decried as nothing more than a hot-looking boss rush the year after and then, last year, damned for its cobbled-together platforming sections. Perhaps that's why it wasn't playable at the show this year. Given that meagre team size, it's probably the right call to finish it instead of knocking out another demo, but it was a disappointing, conspicuous absence – even if people would've probably slagged it off.



PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

Developer Brendan Greene **Publisher** Bluehole Studio
Format Xbox One **Release** 2017

Brendan Greene must be enjoying life at the moment. Currently having phenomenal success on Steam with his battle royale multiplayer shooter, the self-styled PlayerUnknown is now set to clean up on consoles – and timed Xbox One exclusivity presumably didn't come cheap. Whatever the cost, it's quite the catch for Microsoft. The *PUBG* hype train shows no signs of slowing down, the formula bulletproof: 100-player deathmatches, pitting teams of up to four players against each other, with occasional random missile strikes and an ever-shrinking play area to prevent camping. There can only be one winner. Given its compulsive allure as a spectator sport, *Battlegrounds* might even be the game that finally gives Microsoft's Twitch-alike Mixer service a reason to exist.



SUPER LUCKY'S TALE

Developer Playful Corp **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** November 7

It's quite a bold recipe. Take a humdrum, charmless, weirdly slow 3D platformer that's only even vaguely noteworthy because of its VR component. Now, remove the VR bit, and make a sequel to it. The result, as you might expect, is very little worth writing home about. And that's putting it politely. A trailer should, you'd think, show a game's highlights. On that basis we assume that the titular fox bouncing on a trampoline to collect a vertical line of coins, hitting a switch to reveal a platform two feet away, jumping a series of small gaps, or ambulating through a side-scrolling section, are about as good as *Super Lucky's Tale* gets. At an E3 where *Super Mario Odyssey* rewrote the 3D-platforming rulebook to such stunning effect, this never stood a chance.



MINECRAFT

Developer Mojang **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Format** Xbox One **Release** 2017

Yep, it's still a sensation. So much so that Mojang has announced the cross-platform Better Together update, which will let Minecrafters everywhere share the same game worlds regardless of the device they're playing on. Unless you own a PS4 or PS Vita, that is. Sony has, once again, declined to join in on the fun, citing security concerns. For The Players indeed.

Making *Minecraft* a more unified community brings benefits, of course. The Minecraft Marketplace – selling custom content like skins, texture packs and staggeringly detailed pre-built maps from individual creators – will expand, while multiplayer servers from community partners Lifeboat, InPvP, Mineplex and CubeCraft are to be brought into the game on all platforms. Would-be owners of the Xbox One X, however, can expect some specific perks. Minecraft Realms, for

instance, will offer subscription-based private servers for up to 10 simultaneous players.

Both X and Windows 10 users will also bag a 4K facelift for the game via the cloyingly named Super-Duper Graphics Pack this autumn. It's easy to scoff at the merits of drawing the game's blocky pixels at such a level of clarity, but the update will simply bring *Minecraft* in line with the array of community-created shaders that can run on powerful PCs, adding realistic lighting, shadows and water reflections to your worlds. Alright, an indulgently pretty version of a six-year-old game wouldn't be our pick for showing off the clout of a brand-new Xbox, but this at least proves that Microsoft is serious about the future of *Minecraft*. Landing one in Sony's eye is, of course, a welcome bonus.



STATE OF DECAY 2

Developer Undead Labs Publisher Microsoft Studios Format PC, Xbox One Release 2018

A zombie game is a hard sell in 2017. But it was a hard sell in 2013 too, when Undead Labs launched the first *State Of Decay*. Clunky, uneven and ramshackle, the game nonetheless attracted some 4.5 million players, its flaws easily overlooked because of the things it did so well. It was not a game about killing zombies – though we certainly killed a lot. Instead, it was a game about surviving the undead apocalypse, a deep simulation of what it takes for people to stay alive against overwhelming, flesh-eating odds.

The sequel smooths out the first game's kinks, broadens and deepens its simulation, and adds what the studio says was the most-requested feature that never made it into the first game: online co-op. That comes either through menu selections to join or invite friends, or by simply firing a flare gun into the sky, which starts matchmaking with players who have offered their services as volunteers. Yet it's the simulation elements, rather than the prospect of palling around in the undead killing fields, that most allures about *State Of Decay 2*.

The character-trait system has been greatly expanded. We're introduced to Matt, whose past life as a choreographer gives him natural strength and speed; he's been used a lot in combat, and has been elevated to the rank of Hero, which confers a stat bonus onto the entire party. But he also snores,

which contributes to an ongoing community-wide problem with sleep deprivation, and has stringent expectations of others, which has put a little ding in our morale stat.

The community's biggest current problem, however, is food. Unless it's addressed starvation will set in within days, affecting health, stamina and morale, and may lead to departure or death. Luckily Tiffany, a recent recruit, used to be a groundskeeper; rather than head out to scavenge for food and a quick fix, we can instead go hunting for seeds, while the rest of the group – including Tiffany, who's too important to risk and won't be much use anyway, because of her asthma – stay back to build a farm.

Exploration is perilous. You can enter almost every building in the open world, searching its cupboards and crevices quickly or quietly. We find some seeds, but are quickly alerted by radio comms that there's a noise problem back home: constructing the farm has drawn a horde of zombies, and we race back, keen to stop them from entering the base. If they get in, the entire community will be drawn into the fight. After all this, the last thing we want to do is lose Tiffany. A few dozen hacks and slashes later, the base is clear, the group is safe, our demo ends and we walk away surprised. Undead Labs, in the year 2017, just sold us a zombie game.

The sequel smooths out the first game's kinks, and broadens and deepens its simulation



Battles are broken up by gentle exploration, as you guide your gang around the Mushroom Kingdom via a sort of sentient roomba named Beep-0

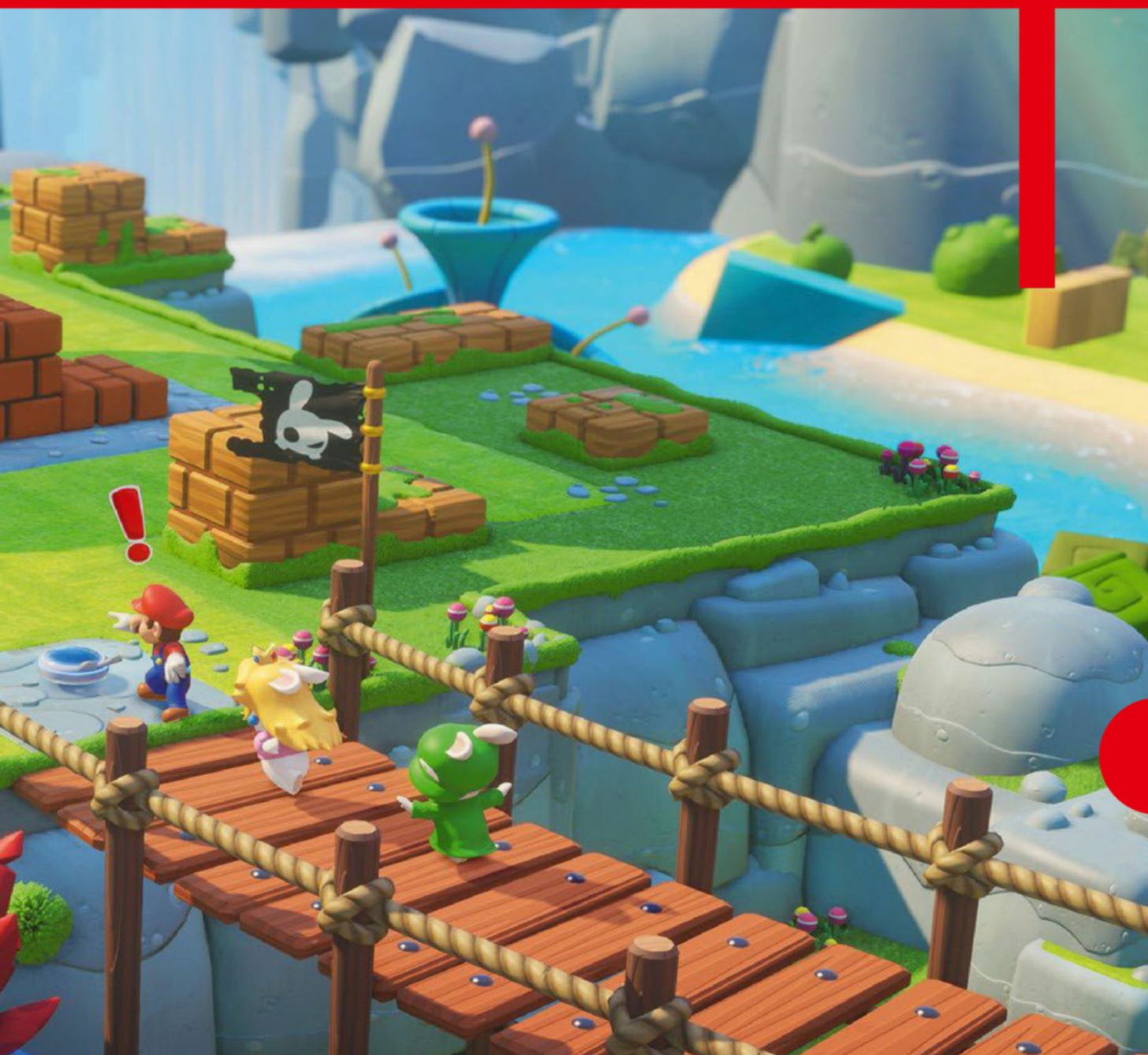
MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOM BATTLE

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Paris, Milan) Format Switch Release August 29

The last thing we expected the *Rabbids* to have was a brain. Yet the detestable creatures' next outing sees gaming's most beloved avatar fights side by side with Rayman's furry, moronic annoyances. And it's *smart*. This turn-based strategy RPG borrows much from *XCOM*. Yes, including the guns — we're still struggling to process that. Miyamoto asked Ubisoft to "try and make a *Mario* game that has never been made before". Job done.

Our three-hero squad consists of Mario himself alongside — bite

your tongue, now — Rabbid Peach and Rabbid Luigi. The trick is manoeuvring each into favourable squares within their allotted movement fields (indicated by a blue border). You must set up attack rounds for your team while minimising the damage from the enemy Rabbids' turns, using various kinds of offensive and defensive positioning — including half or full cover, as in the *XCOM* games — keeping team members with key skills close, while leaving emergency escape options open.



Not that there's much in the way of crisis in our demo. It's frustrating that the AI doesn't put up much of a fight, because movement options soar way beyond XCOM's stilted traversal. We can send a character directly to an enemy square for a melee slide tackle, then select where they skid to afterwards. They can then perform a follow-up shot from their blaster — if the percentage chance is high enough to allow a hit.

This combo proves essential, and we're soon incorporating the white warp pipes along the sides of the board. In a single turn, we can use them to get around the back of an enemy, tackle them, then whizz through the pipes to the other side and into cover for a second shot at a different target. Sending them to an ally afterwards also reaps dividends: slide-striking an enemy with Rabbid Peach, perhaps, then moving her to Mario to be thrown behind cover.

One section featuring a Chain Chomp that attacks the character closest to it requires a little more care over positioning, but otherwise, it's plain sailing. Perhaps it's aimed at a younger audience, but there's significant depth under *Mario + Rabbids'* vibrant surface. Characters and blasters offer specific abilities: Rabbid Peach can use her built-up energy meter to heal the team, for example, while the Piranha Pelter has a chance to deal enemy-slowing 'honey' damage.

It's a lot to take in, which is either a brilliant surprise or intimidating, depending on the age of the person picking up the game. Whether it contains that Nintendo magic to cater to all ages is still doubtful — and such a drastic new style of game is quite the risk. But if there's anything we've learnt, it's that Nintendo retains the capacity to counter expectations. So, on this evidence, does Ubisoft.



METROID PRIME 4

Developer TBA **Publisher** Nintendo
Format Switch **Release** TBA

This is not what we expect from Nintendo. Unlike so many of its peers, the Kyoto company tends to keep its powder dry until a game is ready to be shown off properly – yet all it did here was show a big number four, with a line of text confirming that the *Metroid Prime* series is no longer a trilogy. Details are, therefore, a bit on the scant side. Nintendo was forced to publicly retract a claim from its US comms director that the game would be out in 2018; all we really know is that Kensuke Tanabe is at the helm, but that Retro Studios is not involved, with what NOA's Bill Trinen says is a "talented new development team" making the game instead. For most, mere confirmation of *Prime 4*'s existence is more than enough for now.



ROCKET LEAGUE

Developer/publisher Psyonix
Format Switch **Release** 2017

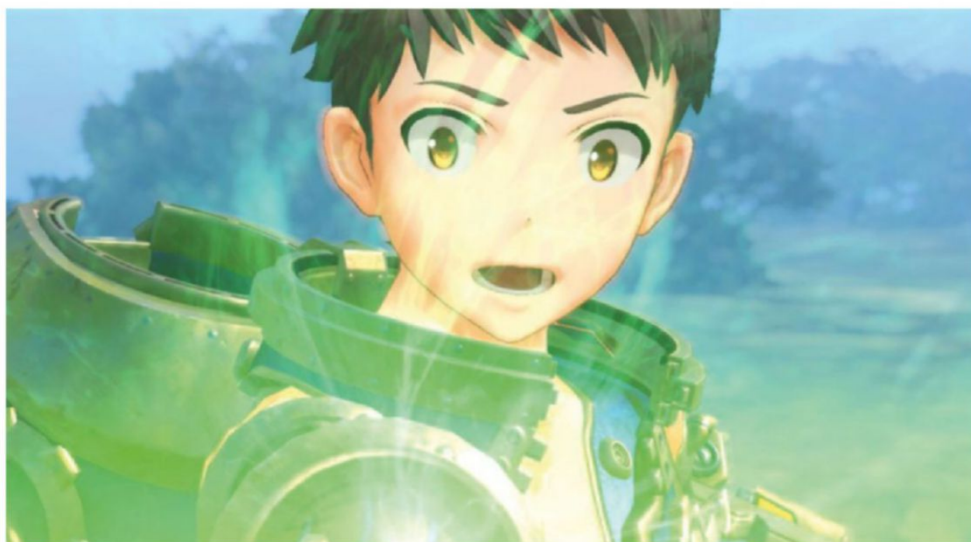
Psyonix's brilliant car-powered football game has sold over 10 million copies to date across consoles and PC, but the prospect of a portable version is a delicious one indeed. A game that has already featured licensed tie-ins with the likes of *Back To The Future*, *Gears Of War* and *Portal* is a natural fit for a Nintendo console: Mario and Luigi hats have been confirmed, but we certainly don't expect things to end there. Wireless local multiplayer will be available, while online you'll be able to do battle with players on Steam, Windows 10 and Xbox One – though not, as you may have heard, with those on PlayStation 4. Still, that's unlikely to dull the sales potential of a portable version of one of the most surprising videogame success stories around.



SUSHI STRIKER: THE WAY OF SUSHIDO

Developer Indieszero **Publisher** Nintendo
Format 3DS **Release** 2018

Most of Nintendo's focus at E3 this year may have been on Switch, but the company has spent 2017 assuring us there's life in 3DS yet – and bonkers puzzle game *Sushi Striker* provides a convincing reason for keeping the ageing handheld charged up. Developed by Indieszero, the small Japanese studio behind such esoteric fare as *Electroplankton* and the *NES Remix* games, it tasks you with matching like-coloured plates of sushi with the stylus before flinging them at an opponent, an attack multiplier building for bigger stacks. With eye-catching art, a silly story about a country in ruins after a war over raw fish, and a soundtrack full of J-pop bangers, it won't sell millions, but we're all over it like white on rice.



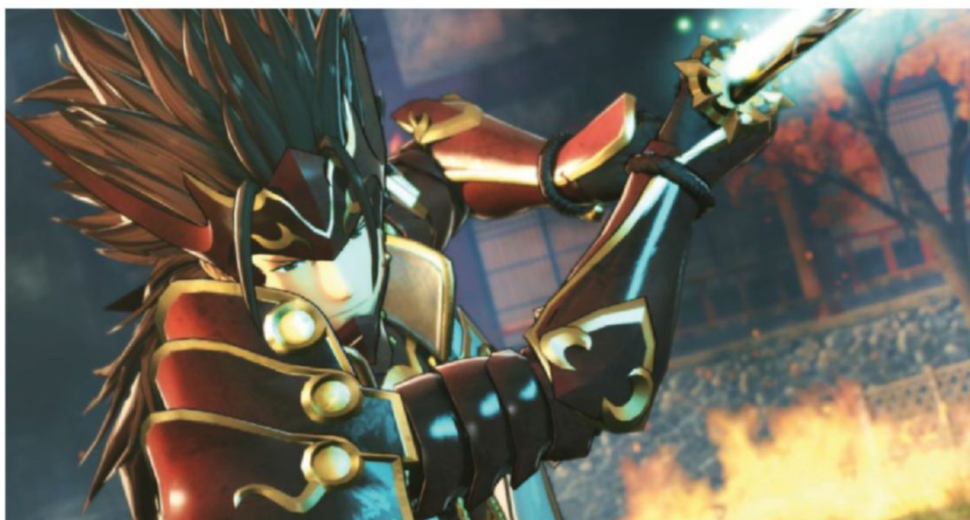
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 2

Developer Monolith Soft **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** Winter

There's a reason Nintendo has limited our glimpses of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* to a lot of footage of people running around – and it's not just been to showcase the variety and beauty of the game's world. Combat has, in a way, been streamlined for this sequel. But it's a difficult thing to get your head around.

Your avatar performs their basic attacks automatically, as in the first game. And you still select from a pool of special attacks, known as Arts. But where previously Arts were governed by cooldowns, here they are charged by performing basic attacks. Performing Arts, in turn, charges your Blade ability. Once the meter is full, you can inflict a status effect – but hold on to it, and you can power up a level-three attack, and watch as the damage output rises into the thousands.

Each Blade has just three Arts, selectable using face buttons and shown in the lower-right corner. Yet there are multiple blades (a menu screen suggests you can hold a couple of dozen at once), shown in the bottom-left corner and switchable with the direction buttons. It's a flexible system, then, but combat is slow, and lacks weight to make up for it. The story may be the main draw – it's why this bears the *Chronicles* name while *Xenoblade X*, with its focus on an open world, did not – and it's an intriguing set-up, where you travel along the backs of Titans or in airships, never setting foot on truly solid ground. A show-floor demo was never going to go too deeply into the narrative; it's that, rather than the overhauled combat, that has us marking off the days until the game's release.



FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS

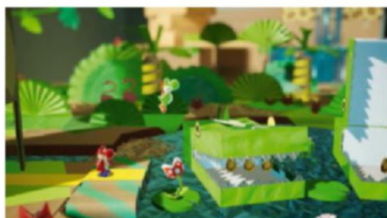
Developer Omega Force, Team Ninja, Intelligent Systems **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** Autumn

After the unlikely success of *Hyrule Warriors* on Wii U and 3DS, Nintendo was always likely to task Omega Force with repeating the trick on Switch. And while on first inspection this is simply what the name implies – a classic *Dynasty Warriors* hack-and-slash set in the *Fire Emblem* universe – this is no lazy cash-in. Indeed, the developers have gone to surprising lengths to make this feel like a *Fire Emblem* game.

The grid-based map screen hints at what's to come. All characters can be assigned to different parts of the level, and will attack or defend automatically as circumstances demand, though you can switch between party members instantly with a single button press (a feature introduced in *Hyrule Warriors'* 3DS incarnation). If two allies are assigned to the same area,

they can team up for more powerful attacks — do so repeatedly, and the bond between them will grow. The significance of *Warriors'* relationship system is unknown; if it means we can marry Frederick again, we're all for it.

Yet there are concessions to *Warriors* fans, too. Ally placement can be automated, for instance, and the level-up screen, which pauses the action to show a character's stat increases, can be disabled. Colosseum mode should satisfy all: hived off from the main story, it features 1v1 battles between famous *Fire Emblem* names. It's easy to be cynical about *Warriors* games: Omega Force pumps them out at speed, and tinkers little with its formula. Yet its partnership with Nintendo's enviable IP portfolio continues to yield dividends.



YOSHI

Developer Good-Feel **Publisher** Nintendo
Format Switch **Release** 2018

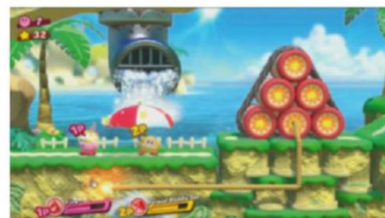
The trailer may have suggested that *Yoshi's* Switch debut was a hastily ported-over 3DS game – what with all those simple transitions between planes, and our hero throwing eggs at objects in the background – but there's a lot more to Good-Feel's latest. Complete one of the levels and you'll be invited to play it from the opposite perspective. Objects that were once in the distance are now in the foreground, fuzzed out of focus; moving platforms are revealed to have been pushed around by sweaty Shy Guys; and previously unseen secrets are discovered. Co-op puts a smart spin on the mechanic: if both perform a ground pound at the same time, the perspective flips immediately. It's a cheery, refreshing take on the *Yoshi's Island* template which, after all these years, was beginning to show its age in *Yoshi's Woolly World*.



METROID: SAMUS RETURNS

Developer Nintendo, MercurySteam **Publisher** Nintendo
Format 3DS **Release** September 15

This 2.5D reimagining of *Metroid II: Return Of Samus* provides a belated explanation for why Nintendo sent a cease and desist to the team behind fan remake *A2MR*. While the map and bosses will be similar, there are enough new additions — free aim for Samus' arm cannon, for instance, and a parry — to justify the name change. Aeion energy can be used to boost abilities: for powerful machine-gunning, say, or better sensors to discover hidden paths. A 3DS-only release may sting for Switch owners, but this is cause for celebration rather than complaint, even if MercurySteam's pedigree is open to question (it made lukewarm 3DS spin-off *Castlevania: Mirror Of Fate*). But let's be honest: if you'd told us before E3 we were getting two *Metroid* announcements, we'd have bitten your hand off.



KIRBY

Developer/publisher Nintendo
Format Switch **Release** 2018

The lovable/hateful pink blob has a thing for absorbing powerful elements. His latest title, then, is Kirby all over — it's sucked up all the best parts of his previous games and combined them. Helpers return from *Kirby Super Star*: this time, a pink heart is thrown at eligible enemies to transform them into AI buddies. The ability-mixing feature from *The Crystal Shards* is back too, as evidenced by a CPU Burning Leo combining his firepower with Kirby's sword. Even the secret-revealing broom from *Dream Land 3* makes an appearance. And you can play with up to three friends: a sequence where Kirby and four pals join into a rolling ring makes for new platforming mechanics, as does the inevitable but far more challenging Whispy Woods boss. For a Kirby game so all-encompassing, we're starting to think Nintendo should keep the working title.



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

Developer EA Motive, Criterion, DICE Publisher EA Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release November 17

EA has struck an oddly apologetic tone when discussing *Battlefront II*. The lack of content in its predecessor's launch incarnation was always going to be the elephant in the room, but it's been strange to see a company normally so sure of itself go to such lengths to reassure everyone that it has learned from its past mistakes. On stage at EA Play, the publisher's CEO Andrew Wilson said there'd been plenty of feedback to 2015's *Star Wars Battlefront*: "A lot of it positive, and a bunch of it... constructive." He even paused for the laugh he knew was coming.

The EA Motive producer who guides us through a demo toes the party line, assuring us that *Battlefront II* will ship with three times the content of its predecessor. That includes what, for many, was the most damning absence from the original, but is the main draw of the sequel, and forms the focus of our demo: a singleplayer story campaign.

The action kicks off early in the game, just after the destruction of the second Death Star at the end of *Return Of The Jedi*. As Imperial special commander Iden Versio, we race to shut down a Rebel destroyer. It's an



The campaign may be the main draw, but there are changes planned for *Battlefront II*'s multiplayer, too, including a new class-based structure

effective choice for a demo mission, explaining the narrative setup while offering a broad spread of mechanics. First we're in a TIE Fighter, chasing after a Rebel corvette, dogfighting with X-wings along the way, the controls much improved over the first game's multiplayer equivalent. Then we work through the ship's innards to a control room, which we must first capture, then hold while our drone sets about disabling its systems.

There's a little flexibility to proceedings through your drone's abilities – it can deploy a shock field that electrocutes enemies in range, for instance. And once you reach the control room, options unfurl. A Motive staffer plays through the section first, enters through a side door and dispatches enemies from the shadows. When it's our turn, we head straight through the front door, all guns blazing.

The whole thing looks and feels indistinguishable from the multiplayer component: the HUD is identical, abilities are still governed by cooldowns, and Motive has resisted the temptation to tinker with character movement speeds to make Versio feel more powerful. It's an effective showcase of EA's mission to fix the first game's transgressions, but we leave our demo with one concern: we just don't buy the premise. For 40 years, Star Wars has been a battle of good versus evil; now, for the first time, we're being asked to root solely for the bad guys. When Versio is told that the Death Star has been destroyed and the Emperor is dead, she looks heartbroken – but our empathy is in short supply. An Imperial soldier would have seen the Sith in action; they would have seen entire planets destroyed in a heartbeat. Lord Vader... are we the baddies?



ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal) Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release October 27

Ubisoft's decision to give *Assassin's Creed* a year off in 2016 was a huge one. The series has, after all, become one of the most important entries on its publisher's balance sheet: its largest seller, on shelves every Autumn without fail, guaranteed to sell multiple millions and offset any disappointments elsewhere on the release slate. Taking this bold step would, you'd think, mean *Origins* would emerge from its extra 12 months at E3 2017 shorn of bugs, and with a host of new gameplay ideas. If that's the case, prepare to be disappointed.

In fairness, with several months of development to go – and the final stages of a game's creation being one of optimisation – it may not be fair to lay too heavily into this weirdly jerky, uneven game. Yet camera problems in combat are concerning, especially given the extent to which hand-to-hand battles have been overhauled. There's a heavy debt to FromSoftware's work here, with light and heavy attacks on the right shoulder and trigger, a face-button evasive dodge, and weighty heft as blows connect.

Yet even in a gladiatorial arena built specifically for brawling, the camera gets stuck on scenery and generally takes up awkward positions. The result is that we frequently look on helplessly as we whiff attacks that looked like they should connect, leaving us wide open to reprisal. That's a particular problem

during a wearily attritional boss battle. Commendable as it is for Ubisoft to seek to refresh *Assassin's Creed's* simplistic combat, we put down the pad after this clunky, stiff swordfight pining for days of old.

Out in the open world, meanwhile, innovation is thin on the ground. Standing on the shore, we're given the vague location of two objectives; to pinpoint them, we need to call on Senu, our eagle companion. This is ancient Egypt, but Senu is essentially *Watch Dogs 2's* drone with feathers, albeit with a central reticle shrinking as it gets closer to our quarries. One is a sunken treasure, and a dip below the surface quickly yields it. The other is on a heavily guarded ship; we dispatch a few through stealth, then fight the others, and the camera, by hand.

In addition to our mission-critical pick-up, there's a chest and some corpses to loot, which serves as an introduction to *Origins'* gear game, powered thanks to, we assume, some advice from the developers of *The Division*. Weapons and armour have stats, perks and rarity levels; legendary gear may be new for *Assassin's*, but in a wider context the prospect of yet another loot grind hardly sets the pulse racing. Despite the series' recent woes, we missed *Assassin's Creed* last year, and are looking forward to having it back. Let's hope the final few months yield some much-needed polish.

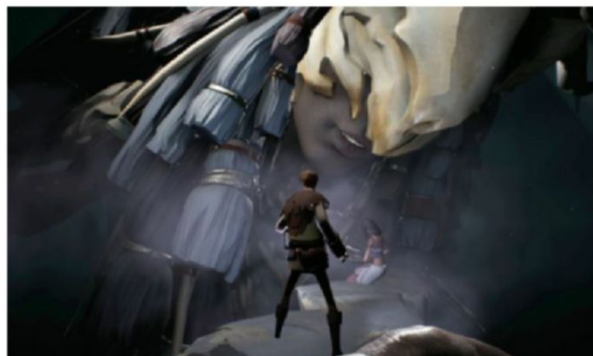
In a gladiatorial arena built specifically for brawling, the camera takes up awkward positions



METRO EXODUS

Developer 4A Games **Publisher** Deep Silver
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

You can normally name a new game within seconds of the start of its E3 trailer, but *Metro Exodus* had us stumped. The hints were there, of course – the camera lingering on an abandoned gas mask certainly suggested its heritage – but it was *outdoors*. The *Metro* games take place almost entirely below ground. We're told to expect plenty of similar sections in *Metro Exodus*, though it appears the focus this time is on the surface. 4A Games intends to mix *Metro*'s signature linear action with more open, explorable environments as returning protagonist Artyom embarks on a train journey across post-apocalyptic Russia. The demo, with its suspiciously well-timed attacks from persistent mutants, was worryingly tightly scripted; 4A prefers the term 'choreographed', and insists the final game will feel more dynamic. We're looking forward to finding out.



ASHEN

Developer Aurora44 **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2018

Bingo cards at the ready: this open world RPG has shades of *Dark Souls*, *Journey* and *Zelda*. Combat in the dusky forest feels deliberate – and familiar – but it's the passive multiplayer element that introduces intrigue. We can't talk to our partner (as in *Journey*, there'll be no voice chat, with gestures the only form of communication) but when we spot a door with two handholds, we wordlessly agree on what to do. Teamwork is key once the dungeon opens – our friend lights the darkness with a lantern while we battle a gargantuan spider. Our demo comes to an abrupt end when we blindly follow our anonymous pal off a ledge to our death. With no verbal warnings to heed, *Ashen* will be punishing. But away from the brainteasers and bosses, battling in silence with a partner is a puzzle all its own – and one with a unique allure.



ANTHEM

Developer BioWare **Publisher** EA **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

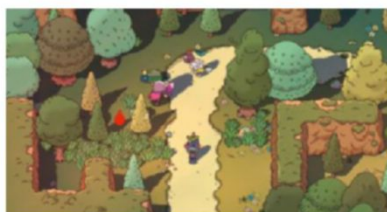
If you were disappointed by *Mass Effect Andromeda*, here's the game to blame; *Anthem* has been BioWare's primary focus for the past few years. Some of the studio's fans are unhappy, taking this as a signal that the days of BioWare making deep, singleplayer, story-based games are, if not over, then at least fading fast. Others – us included – are simply struggling to see the game beneath its all-too-obvious influences.

There are shades of *Titanfall* in its robot designs, and of any recent *Call Of Duty* in the class-based, but customisable exosuits. Others have pointed out similarities to *Killzone Shadow Fall* or *Dead Space* or just about any sci-fi shooter you can think of. Mostly, there is *Destiny*. So, so much *Destiny*. It is multiplayer

focused; there is loot; there is even a ten-year plan between developer and publisher. *Anthem* is, by a stretch, the better-looking game, and it was a fine choice with which to close out a press conference at which Microsoft had announced the most powerful console of all time. Yet strip away the set dressing and you have *Destiny* with jetpacks, published by EA.

Yes, we know, great artists steal. And sure, if you strip *Destiny* back to the bare essentials it's not exactly an original concept. And just as we have played a lot of *Destiny*, so we will probably play a lot of *Anthem*. But it will be tinged with sadness – at how one of the last of the big-budget story specialists has vacated its wheelhouse, and opted instead to follow the crowd.

MULTIFORMAT+PC@E3



THE SWORDS OF DITTO

Developer Onebitbeyond **Publisher** Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4 **Release** 2018

Devolver has a predilection for games with a quirky sting in the tail, and roguelike RPG *The Swords Of Ditto* fits the bill. Should your hero die on their quest to defeat sorceress Mormo, they'll become legend; time whirrs forward 100 years, the overworld morphs into a different form and your next randomly generated character takes up the mantle as the new Sword Of Ditto. Mementos of the previous incumbent are everywhere: you can pick up their loot, find their monuments and hear NPCs praise or trash-talk them. It's a creative, charming take on Roguelike permadeath, bolstered by imaginative combat and *Zelda*-like dungeons – we use outsize conkers and vinyl-record frisbees to hammer enemies as well as solve puzzles. Playing with a friend feels great, too: you can resurrect them with a hug that sacrifices half your health bar. Wrapped up in a candy-coloured cartoon art style, *Swords* is altogether wonderfully disarming.



MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** September 19

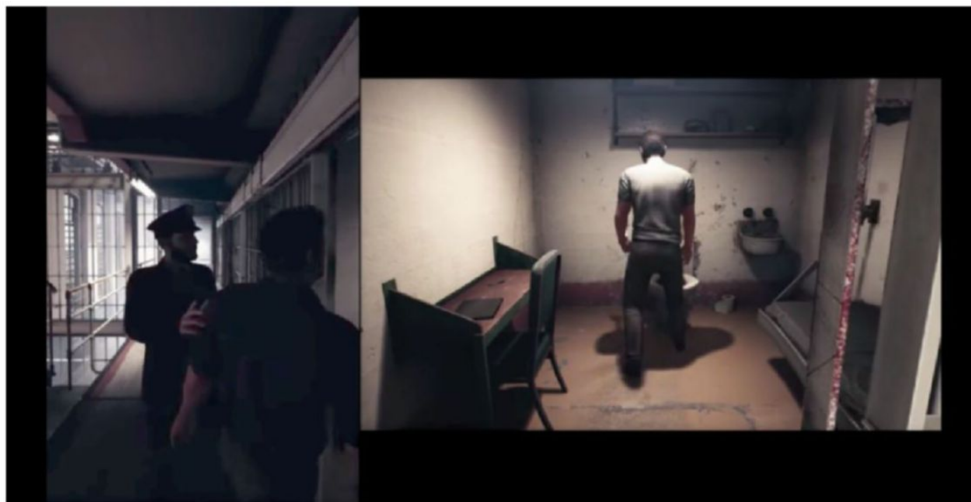
The worst thing you can do in a fighting game is back yourself into a corner. Unfortunately, that's exactly what Capcom's done by releasing *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite*'s free Story Demo. The intentions are noble: *Street Fighter V*'s threadbare launch offering betrayed a rush-job, and Capcom is understandably keen to prove that *Infinite* will at least arrive content complete. The demo is a deeply unflattering chunk of it, however: strictly (and poorly) scripted one-liners give way to versus-AI brawls with preset two-man teams and little opportunity for experimentation. It's clearly an older build too, dodgy lighting and shading accentuating some of the shonkier character models (Chun-Li's face is already an Internet meme). What a shame, considering the creative core fighting system would doubtless win over plenty of players given the chance to shine. As it is, Capcom's invited a beatdown here: it really shouldn't have bothered.



THE DARWIN PROJECT

Developer/publisher Scavengers Studio
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

This is some achievement from a 12-person studio, which in just nine months has assembled an intriguing, survival-focused Battle Royale – albeit one whose unveiling was spoiled somewhat by an overexcited shoutcaster on Microsoft's E3 stage. *The Darwin Project* is the latest in an increasingly long line of no-respawn deathmatches, and ticks the requisite genre boxes. However, it looks to stand out by putting survival mechanics, not just combat, at its core. The first thing you'll need to do, for instance, is light a fire, lest you freeze to death. There's an immediate tension, however, since doing so risks alerting other players to your location. After that comes scavenging and crafting, though there's a twist: characters have powers, such as cloaking abilities and wall hacks. Viewers do too, and are able to affect the match. Despite its annoying E3 showing, *The Darwin Project* looks like a worthy addition to an increasingly crowded genre.



A WAY OUT

Developer Hazelight Studios **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

From the looks of the reveal trailer and the sounds of the title, *A Way Out* is a two-player co-op Prison Break simulator. But in our demo, jailbird lead characters Leo and Vincent have long flown the clink and are wandering about a petrol station they're planning to rob. On one half of the split screen, the player controlling Leo decides to warn a customer away and enters a cutscene conversation. Vincent strolls past in realtime in Leo's background, sabotaging the phone in view on his screen to prevent any inconvenient outgoing calls.

We can't help but think of a David Cage game, with its focus on choice, consequence and gently generic action scenes. But the two-player entry requirement – preferably local, we're told by director Josef Fares – is a bold move in an era of online-

only blockbusters. While the finer details lack the elegance afforded by Quantic Dream's technological clout (facial animation veers towards the uncanny), the award-winning director's cinematic vision wins out. On a laptop, we're shown in-progress gameplay footage of a hospital chase. The camera sweeps in one continuous shot through vents and around corridor corners before the full screen view lands on the other character, and it's player two's turn to run.

Whether the sudden player switches will handle as smoothly in open play as they do in Fares' footage is another matter. Then again, Fares was the man behind the inventive PS3 adventure *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons* – hopefully *A Way Out* will be as technically solid as it is conceptually intriguing.



CALL OF DUTY: WWII

Developer Sledgehammer Games Publisher Activision Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release November 3

Phew. While our trip to Sledgehammer Games for **E307's** cover story left us confident that the studio's exhaustive research work would deliver a robust, authentic singleplayer campaign, we remained unconvinced by the multiplayer component. Slow, heavy, World War II-era weapons and gear seemed incompatible with the Ritalin-paced merry-go-round of the modern-day COD online mode. After an hour-long session, any lingering concerns have melted away.

Team Deathmatch and Domination play out largely as you'd expect, but benefit hugely from what feels like a slower pace. It may simply be a consequence of *WWII's* developer removing the expanded traversal abilities that have infected COD multiplayer in recent times, or of flattening out maps which had grown upwards to accommodate double jumps and wallruns. But it feels right – more so than any COD in years.

The star of the show, however, is War, which borrows from the *Battlefield* series the idea of a multiplayer map that focuses the action on a series of single chokepoints that one team is seeking to capture, the other to retain. First, allied and axis forces fight over a house; then, over a bombed-out bridge the attacking side needs to rebuild. Before long we're trying to claim a courtyard munitions dump. There are two objectives beyond that, but

neither team makes it that far. It's a wonderful mode, adding pacing, dynamism and focus to a multiplayer component that, has slowly turned into a game of running around in circles looking for people to shoot. Loadouts are no longer just a matter of preference, but often of necessity: the attacking team will want close-range weapons when taking the courtyard, but mid-range rifles when advancing on the house. And good luck taking the

bridge unless at least one of your team brings smoke grenades and a sniper rifle. Those leaderboard-topping kids, with their SMGs and catlike reactions, are in for a shock.

Weaponry, meanwhile, is both authentic – the iconic ping of the Garand, for instance – and in many cases smartly designed to boot. Sledgehammer's treatment of the humble sniper rifle is ingenious, authentic and, to those who like to use them like shotguns when danger approaches, an absolute nightmare. Scoping in narrows your field of vision to the sights and sights alone, and blocks out almost all ambient sound. It makes sniping a commitment, as it should be, a trade-off of power and range against vulnerability up close. It's emblematic of Sledgehammer's approach to a game that is respectful, authentic and all the rest of it, while also fixing many of the problems that put more and more people off COD each year. Victory seems assured.

The leaderboard-topping kids, with their SMGs and catlike reactions, are in for a shock



WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

Developer MachineGames Publisher Bethesda Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release October 27

The empty wheelchair – a maligned horror cliché cameoed in everything from *BioShock* to *Alien Isolation*. You know the drill: creep into a room and a light flickers; a vacant chair sits lifeless; a bloodied hand mark on the floor, its owner having been dragged unceremoniously into the shadows.

Things are different in *Wolfenstein II*. There's a wheelchair, but it's not for incidental environmental flourish. Instead, MachineGames uses it to transform returning protagonist William 'BJ' Blazkowicz into a mobile

weapon. Set five months after the first game, *The New Colossus*' opening sees Blazkowicz newly awoken from a coma and in a vulnerable state. Wheeling around with nothing but a submachine gun, you have to navigate the tight corridors of a stolen Nazi Uboat. But it's different to how you're used to moving through a shooter – come across a ladder and you're unable to ascend, forced instead to manoeuvre through a system of conveyor belts. Keep watch, too, as you roll through its corridors so a patrolling Nazi doesn't get the jump on you.



The game's October release date may yet change – it's currently up against *Assassin's Creed Origins*, *Super Mario Odyssey* and the PC port of *Destiny 2*

MachineGames proved its craft with *The New Order*, a fresh take on an old name that juggled pure absurdity and genuine poignancy, and the studio seems set to do once again with *The New Colossus*. But it's a familiar re-run. Blazkowicz is still a dour narrator; the Nazis are a relentless caricature of evil; scenes dart between gratuitous torture-porn, comedic gore and romantic wartime sensibility. The nostalgic ra-ta-tat of gunfire is essentially unchanged from three years ago, too. On this evidence, the most significant mechanical change seems to be the addition of automatic ammo pick-up.

Just like in 2014, the magic lies in the game's direction. *Wolfenstein's* world is one of sheer madness, and yet MachineGames finds a way to squeeze compassion and humour in between the goose-stepping. *The New Colossus* promises to up the ante on the crazy – Pete Hines

described it as "fucking bananas" – but a scene where Blazkowicz is reunited with his wife, now pregnant with twins, is truly touching. Later, as he gets a post-coma recap from resistance father figure Set Roth, the camera pans in close on our protagonist as wave upon wave of Nazi soldiers try to get past an electrified wall in the background. Barely in focus, some tip-toe, some wall-hug – it's an offhand comedic masterstroke.

The most sensitive addition is Sigrun, the podgy daughter of Frau Engel, the insane matriarch antagonist from the first game. Disgusted by her obese dependent, Engel bullies and tortures Sigrun to the amusement of her fascist goons, but what should be jarring viewing is pitched perfectly to accentuate the cruelty of its villain and shine a light on the game's purer heart. It's the perfect summation of new-era *Wolfenstein* – completely off the wall, but absolutely on the money.



DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ

Developer Arc System Works **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

We've said it before, and we'll say it again: Arc System Works makes playable anime. It was true for the astonishing *Guilty Gear Xrd*, but *Dragon Ball FighterZ* is the ultimate manifestation of the phrase. It's built with the same stylish toolkit: made in the Unreal Engine, running at 60fps but with character models animated at 15fps to replicate the look of hand-drawn anime. But this time, it's actually based on one. *Dragon Ball Z* fans have been underserved by tie-in videogames for years. That streak has ended.

Dragon Ball FighterZ is spectacular. Clear, crisp and cartoonish, it is eminently readable despite the onscreen chaos. It's a 3v3 fighter in the *Marvel Vs Capcom* style, where tactical play revolves around keeping a well-balanced team alive. The E3 build lets us try out six characters, but they all feel disappointingly similar to play at first – everyone shares the same set of generous abilities, including a side-switching teleport, a Dragon Rush that will break an opponent's guard, and a Marvel-style 'push-block' to force aggressors away.

But as matches play out, concerns fade. For better and worse, it's clear how far a character's individual playstyle can impact match-ups. We find success with aggressive rushdown fighter Gohan – the universal, fireball-ignoring super dash seems made for him, a squeeze of the right trigger instantly closing the gap

between us and a wantaway opponent. It leaves us relatively (and worryingly) safe from counterattack when blocked, though. Indeed, when we switch to zoning-heavy character Frieza, the move doesn't fit the game we're looking to play – and we're constantly punished for it.

But with a 2018 release date, and Arc stating that the game is only 20 per cent complete, nitpicking is perhaps a little redundant. We only do so because

Dragon Ball Z fans have been underserved by tie-in videogames for years. That streak has ended

Arc's attention to detail is legendary – something that *Dragon Ball FighterZ* more than confirms. One studio head told us how his animation team, astounded by the announcement trailer shown at Microsoft's conference, went through it frame by frame to try and work out how Arc did it. They came away with the impression that either Arc has individually lit every single frame of animation by hand, or worked

out a way to make it look like it has. However it's been done, the results are astonishing.

It's clear that this is a fighting game aimed at both the casual anime fan and the obsessive frame counter. From what we've seen so far, it's set to pull off the balance better than any other forthcoming fighter – we don't doubt the final product will feature Arc's usual suite of varied singleplayer modes and clever tutorials. By combining Namco's flair for accessibility and Arc's obsession with the details, *Dragon Ball FighterZ* may well be playable anime's final form.



THE ARTFUL ESCAPE

Developer Beethoven And Dinosaur **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Annapurna Interactive's winning form continues with this psychedelic rock opera, the brainchild of Australian developer Johnny Galvatron. As well as designing the game, he's supplied the frantic fretwork that provides *The Artful Escape* with its beating heart. Tap the jump button twice and, as you'd expect, our lanky, bespectacled hero performs a double jump. But keep pressing it and he'll whip out a magical guitar and play a lightning-paced lick that's pure Bill & Ted. These airborne sonic excursions sync up perfectly with the ethereal backing track; never before has running from left to right felt so wrong. This is a game that begs to be played in the air.

It's not just for show, admittedly – from time to time you'll come to a chasm that must be crossed by a beam of light that

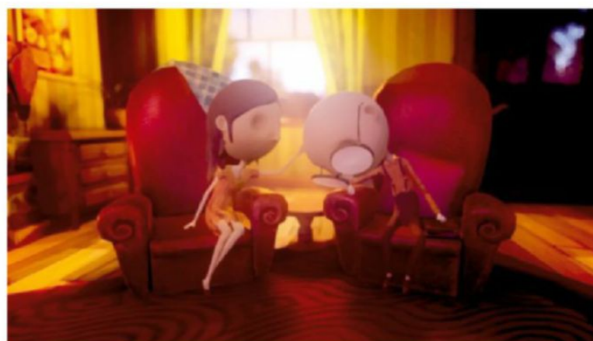
will only carry you if you're wailing away like an overexcited Steve Vai – but it's simple, overtly playful stuff that is perfectly happy to be more about style than substance. Thankfully both elements are to be found in boss battles, which root you to the spot and charge you with matching note patterns using all four face buttons and both bumpers. While its central hook and sumptuous visual style make it ideal for the E3 show floor, it remains to be seen whether the novelty can last the full length of the game – worryingly, the demo ends with a forgettable downhill section that transforms your guitar into a surfboard – but this was one of the most talked-about games at this year's E3. Not bad for a project that comfortably missed its meagre Kickstarter goal a little over a year ago.



SOUTH PARK: THE FRACTURED BUT WHOLE

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (San Francisco)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 17

One of the secrets of South Park's success as a TV show is the speed at which its endearingly, enduringly cheap production values can be taken from the script to the screen; the show is made to a rolling schedule of one-week deadlines. Whether you like it or not, it is always, at least, topical. That's certainly not the case for *The Fractured But Whole*. Announced at E3 two years ago, it's already been delayed twice. And the longer it takes, the less relevant its Hollywood-skewering tale of two rival superhero factions feels. Ha, yes, they sure do make a lot of superhero movies these days. What else have you got? Fart jokes, by the looks of it. While predecessor *The Stick Of Truth* was not without its charms, the sequel's subject matter, delays and change of developer – duties passed from Obsidian to Ubisoft San Francisco – do little to inspire confidence.



LAST DAY OF JUNE

Developer Oversonic **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC, PS4 **Release** August 31

Credit where it's due: 505 Games has come a long way since the *Cooking Mama* days. After the likes of *Payday 2* and *Abzû*, and with *Alan Wake* developer Remedy recently signing up, the publisher is on something of a roll. *Last Day Of June* may not hold quite that profile, but it's further proof that 505 is quietly becoming a vital, discerning publishing partner for the indie scene. Helmed by *Murasaki Baby* director Massimo Guarini and inspired by a song by Steven Wilson, *Last Day Of June* tells of an elderly man whose wife dies in a car crash. He discovers he can time-travel through her paintings, and relives her final hours in an attempt to alter history by preventing the fateful crash. Heartfelt, plaintive and with a charming, mock-stop-motion style, this was a welcome, quiet antidote to the cacophony of the E3 show floor.



METAL GEAR SURVIVE

Developer Konami Digital Entertainment **Publisher** Konami
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

Well, it's a damn sight better than we were expecting. Built on the foundations of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, without Kojima's direction, we're fully prepared for co-op survival zombie shooter *Metal Gear Survive* to be a hollow cash-grab. But during the third wave of our base-defence efforts, up to our ears in mutant threat and gut-churningly low on shotgun shells, we realise we're having fun. Controls recall *MGSV*'s online multiplayer, but the D-pad brings up various defensive items to help protect our wormhole generator. While combat is basic and clunky, it's not without nuance. Ever-weirder enemies have weak spots: shooting Bombers' bulbous heads isn't as effective as knee-capping them, for example. It's not exactly groundbreaking, and it's not particularly polished either (a recent delay might help fix that). Yet it's challenging, and a surprisingly good time. Perhaps there's hope for the post-Kojima Konami yet.



TRANSFERENCE

Developer Spectrevision, Ubisoft Fun House **Publisher** Ubisoft
Format PC, PS4, PSVR, Rift, Vive, Xbox One **Release** Spring 2018

The latest product of Fun House, the small outfit at Ubisoft Montreal with an experimental brief, sees the team partner up with Spectrevision, an LA VFX firm co-founded by one Elijah Wood. This isn't Wood's first foray into VR – he voiced the title character in *Henry*, an Emmy-winning short that launched alongside *Rift*. But *Transference*, as an Ubisoft producer was at pains to point out during a pre-E3 briefing, is absolutely, positively a game, albeit one with film-like elements. It tasks you with entering a VR reconstruction of the minds of multiple members of a single family, piecing together their history and affecting events in the real world through your decisions. It's a Spectrevision concept built by Ubisoft, whose continued support of and experimentation with VR is a rare, commendable thing among companies of its size – though it's hedging its bets a little here, with *Transference* also in development for good old-fashioned consoles and PC.



ABSOLVER

Developer Slodap **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC, PS4 **Release** August 29

We've played *Absolver* a few times now, and each time we do, we're a shade more intrigued. This online, martial-arts, fighting-game RPG certainly doesn't lack complexity: brawling your way through its world takes myriad forms of skill. There's the twitch-based kind, based on rhythm and timing as you dodge, feint and parry foes. Preparation is important, too: you gradually learn new moves from sparring with others, building them into optimal, beautiful 'decks' of combos and fighting styles. And there's a mental skill involved, a balletic dance of memorisation and improvisation, as you chain and switch between combos, weapons and styles.

And we really do mean dance. We try the new drunken boxing style during a one-on-one duel with another player, our avatar's woozy stagger immediately calling to mind early Jackie

Chan. There's no parry with this style, so we cheerfully abuse a tricky feint that throws us backward but ends with a forward kick – until we're eventually figured out, anyway.

This intense one-on-one fight is even more enjoyable than *Absolver*'s impromptu open-world scraps. But at one point, we're beaten into a corner of the barn-like arena, and getting out of the spot seems impossible against an opponent who times their blows perfectly.

It's concerning that *Absolver*'s environments might end up impeding a fair fight (although we're mollified in the final round when we force-blast our foe, using our charged special meter, over an edge for the win). Whether it'll be considered a truly pure fighting experience or a particularly specialist RPG remains to be seen. But not for long: release is just weeks away.



SKULL & BONES

Developer Ubisoft Singapore **Publisher** Ubisoft **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

At an E3 where *Sea Of Thieves* delighted, it was a bit of a surprise to see another multiplayer pirate title appear. In fairness, Ubisoft did it first: *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag's* naval combat was rousing stuff. That component was built by the publisher's Singapore studio; now, it is building an entire game around it.

Indeed, our 5v5 battle feels almost exactly like *Black Flag* at first. We play from the thirdperson perspective of our chosen ship's captain, tapping buttons to order our crew to speed up, turn or slow down our vessel. But as we learn the rules – take down enemy player and AI ships for treasure, then escape safely to bank the most loot and win – tactics come to the fore.

In our Loot Hunt match, we choose to sail a Bruiser – a nippy, highly manoeuvrable ship. Joined by two tankier

Enforcers, and covered by a sniper-like Marksman, we're swashbuckling with the best of them: flanking enemy ships using islands as cover, being an annoyance while waiting for backup, then swooping in quickly to secure points. But instead of heading for the exit to bank our ship's significant plunder for the team, we try to prevent remaining enemy players from similarly escaping. We're swiftly shot down and robbed. Oops.

The pace isn't exactly rollicking, but *Skull & Bones* still manages to feel exciting, the air thick with war cries, sea spray and tension. Whether there's enough going on here to carry a whole game is another matter; if the campaign, amount of ship classes and loadout customisation options are bountiful, however, Ubisoft's ship may be about to come in.



NEED FOR SPEED PAYBACK

Developer Ghost Games **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 10

The focus in *Payback* is on making the player feel like Vin Diesel: an open world to whizz representations of real-life cars around; arcadey handling over hyper-realistic sim driving; long, straight stretches of highway on which to pump the nitrous. It certainly looks and feels Hollywood. Ghost Games has worked hard on the camera to make it react subtly but satisfyingly to every drift and sudden acceleration. Less subtle, but equally gratifying, are *Burnout*-esque takedowns. Moving from slo-mo crashes back to real-time action sequences jars, as does an overabundance of cinematic heist cutscenes. Meanwhile, handling is still doughier than we'd like. We do come away with an overwhelming urge to star in a street racing action flick franchise, though, so *Payback* is firmly on track to realise its own ambitions – even if we continue to dream a little bigger for the series.



DESTINY 2

Developer Bungie **Publisher** Activision
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** September 6

This was a quiet show for Bungie – in fairness it had already had its E3, at *Destiny 2's* lavish unveiling in Los Angeles in May. The opening campaign mission we played for our story in E308 was on the show floor, but most of the real action was behind closed doors, with a few new bits of info dribbling out from interviews. Some of it was well-received – confirmation that the Titan's defensive Ward Of Dawn super will return, for instance – while much of it wasn't, with confirmation that elements such as Ranked PVP and private matches won't be ready for launch putting certain corners of the *Destiny* community on edge. That, sadly, is what happens when you don't have a fresh batch of gameplay footage to show. This was an oddly muted showing for one of our most anticipated games of the year, but relax: we'll have much more to tell you next month.



OOBLETS

Developer Glumberland **Publisher** Double Fine
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2018

We're supposed to look down on games that are a little too obviously inspired by other people's ideas, but only the coldest of hearts could ever sneer at the impossibly cute *Ooblets*. Glumberland's game is in equal parts *Pokemon*, *Pikmin*, *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon*: a game in which you defeat an adorable little creature in battle, then use the seed it drops to grow more of them in your garden. You'll also grow fruit to feed to these sentient crops, granting them new abilities before taking them out on the road with you, your loveable army trailing behind you like a squad of *Pikmin*. You'll meet and do battle with other Ooblet trainers, gaining new seeds and customisation options for your avatar and home. Its cloyingly sweet style may alienate as many as it attracts, but beneath the saccharine surface lies a surprisingly effective blend of some of Nintendo's best ideas.



STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Toronto) Format PS4, Switch, Xbox One Release 2018

Ubisoft may have given *Beyond Good & Evil 2* the closing, one-more-thing showstopper slot at its E3 press conference, but *Starlink* was the most pleasant surprise of the publisher's show, and arguably of E3 as a whole. It marks Ubisoft's belated entry into the toys-to-life sector – which, previously, had been widely assumed to be on the way out. *Starlink* might just be its second wind.

The toys-to-life genre has two persistent problems. First, its collectible figurines play a single, specific role; you can always buy

more, but the differences between them are rarely transformative, simply variations on a theme. Second, the genre is still waiting for its first real classic, for an end to truly justify the means. It has, as a result, struggled to shake off the perception that it is a vehicle for selling toys first, and a videogame genre second.

Until now, that is. *Starlink: Battle For Atlas* solves both problems with playful, elegant class. First, the shelf-life of its toys is greatly extended by making everything modular. Ships are mounted directly



Starlink is the work of a tiny team by Ubisoft's normal standards. An early prototype was made of Lego and the innards of a Wii Remote

onto your controller for an ease of access that is woven into the fabric of the game, since you'll need to change things around a lot. Remove a gun from one craft, and replace it with a weapon from another, and the change is replicated on screen in an instant. Stick a couple of extra wings on there too, if you like, or stack guns on top of guns if the notion takes you. Lift the entire ship off and you reveal a pilot with a unique ability that can similarly be swapped in and out. Craft have base stats – slow but heavily armoured, fast but weedy, and so on – but by mixing and matching, you can customise your ship to suit your playstyle. Experimenting with guns yields similar results: using an icy weapon to freeze and slow enemies is powerful, but follow it up with a volley of fire-type ordnance and an enemy's health bar simply melts.

Crucially, on the evidence of our demo, the game itself is more than up to snuff. Dogfights are light, pacey fun; later we head planetside to rescue a downed friendly transport ship, and the feeling is like piloting a *Destiny* sparrow that's equipped with elementally powered guns. Enemies move slowly enough to allow you to make quick weapon and armour changes, but pack a punch – and during the climactic boss battle, things quickly get hectic.

We have concerns, of course: pricing will be key, and so will balance, since *Starlink* is one overpowered gun away from being forever written off as the physical manifestation of the concept of pay to win. But it's a rare game indeed that comes out of nowhere and breathes new life into a dying genre. If Ubisoft gets the finer details right, it could be onto something very special indeed.



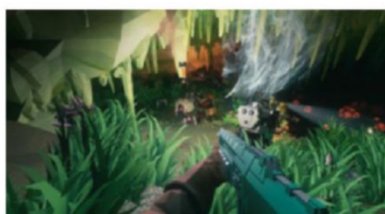
BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montpellier) Format TBA Release TBA

You might not be interested in *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, but Ubisoft certainly gives plenty of fucks about it. This was surely the swaggiest E3 trailer of all time, with most of the filth coming from a cockney simian whose voice actor appears to have stumbled accidentally into the wrong booth while looking for Guy Ritchie's latest project. A CG trailer may not tell us much about Michel Ancel's long-awaited game – aside from its foul mouth, anyway – but for most, a chance to simply lay eyes on such a long-awaited game was more than enough.

Behind closed doors at E3, however, more emerges. This is a large, seamless online game, playable alone or with others. The ship seen at the end of the trailer forms your base of

operations, housing your crewmates, and smaller craft you'll use to zip around planetside. At the touch of a button, you can exit, before setting off on your jetpack. If you're thinking that three modes of transport suggests a world of some scale, well done – it looks vast, with the Asian-style city of Ganesh shown in the trailer merely one city on a continent, on a single planet, that orbits a bigger planet, that's just one of many in the universe. Everything is physically lit, governed by the shifting position of a planet in relation to the sun. The whole thing is seamless. No wonder we've been waiting 14 years for it. If Ancel and team can truly deliver on this lofty promise, the wait will have been more than worth it.



DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

Developer Ghost Ship Games Publisher Coffee Stain Publishing
Format PC, Xbox One Release 2018

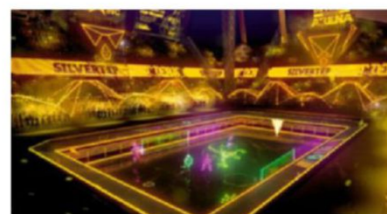
With its pastel-shaded alien landscapes built of voxels, there's a whiff of *No Man's Sky* to *Deep Rock Galactic*, though we'll admit *No Dwarf's Gun* doesn't quite have the same ring to it. This is a cooperative shooter for up to four players who, as employees of the titular interplanetary mining company, are dispatched to the outer reaches of the galaxy to colonise Hoxxes IV, a new planet which, while rich in valuable minerals, is highly dangerous. That, as you might have guessed, requires guns, but there are gadgets too, such as launchers that embed concrete platforms into walls to aid traversal. Alternatively, you could just blast your way through the fully destructible cave systems. Combat is class-based, punchy and of the outsized insect variety: as players empty chamber after chamber into a horde of spiders flooding out of an enormous nest, there's a distinct, welcome whiff of the *Earth Defense Force* games. *Earth Defense Dwarf*? Nah, we guess not.



INDIVISIBLE

Developer Lab Zero Publisher 505 Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One Release 2018

Lab Zero's debut game, the marvellous fighting game *Skullgirls*, was a classic of its genre – but it never broke out of its niche. The studio's sophomore effort might just manage it, however: this is a platformer RPG heavily inspired by cult PS1 game *Valkyrie Profile*, with a combat system heavily informed by Lab Zero's fighting-game nous. While platforming, you'll see only main character Ajna, but when enemies turn up for a pasting, she summons fellow party members who have, it turns out, been hanging out inside her subconscious. Each combatant is mapped to a face button, meaning extravagant multi-character combos are within reach of even the absolute novice. As Ajna levels up, she'll expand her party, broadening her combat options further. After a thoroughly successful Indiegogo campaign all characters will be fully voiced, *Secret Of Mana* composer Hiroki Kikuta is on soundtrack duties, and the game is now also headed to Switch.



LASER LEAGUE

Developer Roll7 Publisher 505 Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release 2018

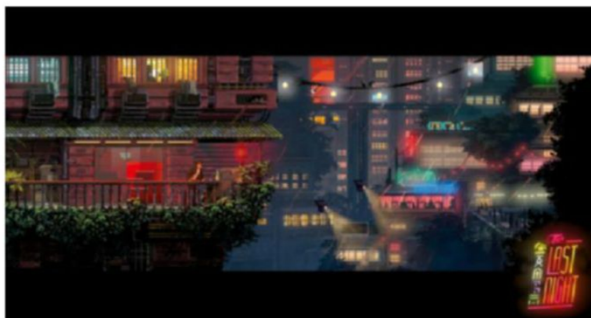
Local-multiplayer future sport *Laser League* hooks us immediately. Matches are the best of three rounds, and revolve around taking control of nodes dotted around the arena. Running near one activates laser fields in your team's colour, eviscerating enemies who run into them. Each arena has different laser grid-patterns, and necessitates a change in tactics – some layouts encourage aggressive, projectile-based play, while others require careful space control. Changing classes and loadouts is a fumble at the moment, as the in-development menus are a bit of a mess. But we soon find our favourites. Blade can dash-ambush for a kill, while Thief steals captured points, which we frequently blindsides incoming foes with. We wouldn't dub it the new *Rocket League* just yet, but it's been a while since a game of this kind has lured us in so quickly. A PlayStation Plus release could be just the ticket.



THE EVIL WITHIN II

Developer Tango Gameworks **Publisher** Bethesda
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 13

Was this sequel commissioned after a Bethesda exec spotted that there was a Friday the 13th in October this year, and felt the opportunity was too good to miss? Whatever the reasoning, creator Shinji Mikami is being given the chance to address the failings of the promising, but flawed original *The Evil Within*, as protagonist Sebastian Castellanos returns to the madness to save Lily, the daughter he thought he had lost in a house fire. The chief addition is a series of open, freely explorable environments designed to balance out the tight, linear areas that powered the first game, and will return here. There's also a device that lets Castellanos move between Union, the horrific mystical city conjured by Lily's subconscious, and the real world. Hopefully Mikami and co have paid equal attention to remedying the original's performance problems, which often made for a very different kind of horror show to the one its creator intended.



THE LAST NIGHT

Developer/publisher Odd Tales
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2018

This gave E3 2017 its Milkshake Duck moment, after an eye-catching announcement trailer turned heads across the industry, only to turn stomachs within minutes after its co-creator's antifeminist beliefs were shared on social media. By the time attendees of Microsoft's E3 conference had emerged from the arena, the Internet had already regretted to inform them that *The Last Night*, for all its neon-lit, pixel-art beauty, was a problem. Creators can believe what they want, of course, but when their controversial personal politics inform a game's core concept, you can expect people to turn away in their droves – and that's precisely what's happened to a game that takes progressivism having 'won' as its dystopian jumping-off point. For what it's worth, director Tim Sorets has distanced himself from views he says he no longer holds – a Microsoft cheque can do wonders for sanding off the rough edges, we hear.



MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

Change is everywhere in *Monster Hunter World*, which initially led some to worry that Capcom was dumbing down a series which, while colossally successful in Japan, has never really taken off elsewhere. Those that love it, *really* love it; many more simply ignore it, while others bounce hard off a game that can often seem to have been designed specifically to repel them. *Monster Hunter World* suggests that Capcom has belatedly realised that there was much about its game that was needlessly fussy and, in places, archaic.

Series fans have heralded as transformative a set of changes that simply make *Monster Hunter* feel contemporary. A fast-travel system that lets you return to base camp wherever you are; the ability to change gear at said camp; radial menus for item selection, and so on. These are, for the hardcore, some

wonderful quality-of-life changes. To everyone else, they simply bring *Monster Hunter* up to modern-day speeds.

Still, there's plenty else here to lure in the uninitiated. For a start, after making its name as a portable game – and spending its last few iterations confined to 3DS – now *Monster Hunter* is back on a powerful home console, and it shows. It will be a simultaneous worldwide release on PS4 and Xbox One, and the game's potential for emergent hijinks was a constant source of chatter on the E3 show floor. The demo played out differently every time; the highlight was an impromptu battle between three huge beasts. How Capcom chooses to market such a famously impenetrable game remains to be seen: a public beta could do wonders for a game that has the potential, at least, to push this overlooked series to the success it has long deserved.



FAR CRY 5

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal) Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release February 27

Given how poorly suited the typical open-world game is to a show-floor demo – a condensed, 20-minute slice rarely flatters a sprawling, 50-hour whole – perhaps we shouldn't read too much into it. But we come away from our first sit down with E308's cover star feeling a little deflated. Our excitement for *Far Cry 5* stems largely from its setting and story; two elements that are never going to be the stars of an E3 demo. But still, at the core, this is just another *Far Cry*, a game of assaulting various configurations of enemies with stealth or absurd ordnance. You needn't fix what's not broken, sure. But we found precious little to be excited about.

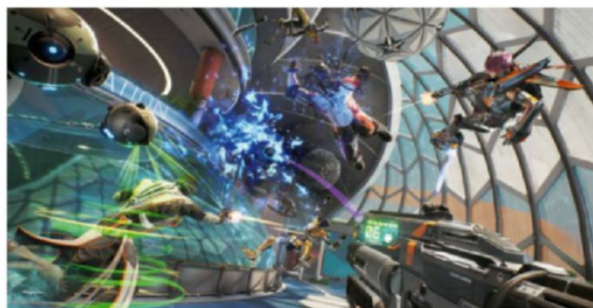
Indeed, the major gameplay addition, the Guns For Hire system, does little to freshen things up. While the three available accomplices are intended to make things feel more flexible, they just make it easier. Calling in an airstrike from pilot accomplice Nick Rye rewards you with a big explosion and a few stragglers to mop up. Boomer, the dog, pads around enemy camps tagging bad guys for you; later he'll grab guns from corpses if you're low on ammo. *Far Cry* has been silly for a while, of course, but it's always made you a participant in the carnage. If the action is really to be this automated, Ubisoft's story team has got a hell of a job on its hands.



NI NO KUNI II: REVENANT KINGDOM

Developer Level-5 Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC, PS4 Release November 10

While *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch* was not without its flaws, it was the sheer verve of Level-5 and Studio Ghibli's worlds and storytelling that drew us in, inspiring a real sense of childlike wonder. Despite Studio Ghibli itself no longer being directly involved, we're excited to revisit Ding Dong Dell – this time playing as recently usurped boy-king Evan. Unfortunately, the battle we're thrown into couldn't be less inspirational. Fighting against dragon Longfang is a mess of muddy, brown visuals and confusing hitboxes. The sequel has moved away from the classic, largely turn-based combat of its predecessor, favouring a realtime combat system – an attempt to appeal to a broader Western audience, presumably, but the battle feels miserably slow as a result. It doesn't help that Longfang soaks up damage like a big, angry sponge, or that Evan won't stop chittering the same irritating line while we fire off long-range spells or swing our sword. What exactly our two party members, Roland and Tani, contribute to the fight is not clear. The Pikmin – sorry, Higgledies – that occasionally appear on the battlefield are useful, however. They replace the Pokemon-esque Familiars from the first game, with each type offering different buffs to the party. It's but a small glimpse into what will no doubt be a colossal JRPG, but we set down the controller worried – and not that compelled – to return to Ding Dong Dell again.



LAWBREAKERS

Developer Boss Key Productions Publisher Nexon
Format PC, PS4 Release August 8

Flow is everything in a great competitive FPS – at least, it is for *Lawbreakers* director and industry veteran **Cliff Bleszinski**. "The kind of shooters that I like to make these days, getting away from *Gears [Of War]*, have that sense of flow," he tells us. "For me, it's what verbs I have – how quickly I can jump off the walls, dodge, grapple, jump-jet, stab, slide." In fairness to Bleszinski and his new studio, the verb-vomit is an accurate representation of their debut game. With the laws of gravity scrambled after the destruction of the moon, *Lawbreakers'* arenas are a mix of tight corridors and open, low-grav areas in which airborne opponents soar past each other while frantically trying to rack up kills. It's running at 60fps on PS4 ("Fuck 30," Bleszinski explains), so twitch-firing our machine pistol at heads is barely a conscious decision. Our hero Wraith can triple-jump, meaning we're high-on impossible to catch. When threats appear, we can combo a slide-kick and an explosive stab to deal devastating burst damage. The Rift-like BlitzBall mode is far too chaotic for teamwork to matter, and it's not likely that the game's metal-clad heroes will inspire Overwatch levels of fervour. *Lawbreakers* feels truly exhilarating, though, and there's no doubt that the potential for high-level play is enormous – especially on PC. Flow perhaps isn't *everything* in a shooter, then, but with a game this meticulously fluid, FPS obsessives could well be swept away.



LIFE IS STRANGE: BEFORE THE STORM

Developer Deck Nine **Publisher** Square Enix **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** August 31

With Dontnod busy working on a second season of episodic teenage drama *Life is Strange*, new studio Deck Nine has been picked by Square Enix to explore what came before. This three-episode prequel is an effort to meet the passionate fanbase's demand for more, again taking place in Arcadia Bay but a few years prior to Max Caulfield's story. Max has momentarily moved away, and so the spotlight falls on her best friend Chloe Price.

Foul-mouthed and fancy-free, Price is a fan-favourite character, and her troubled past coloured many of the events, choices and outcomes in *Life is Strange*. *Before The Storm* focuses on the complicated relationship between Price and another returning character, Rachel Amber. But there'll be no time-reversing powers present in the prequel. In our demo, Price navigates a dive-bar concert without the handy supernatural panic button we're used to.

Initially, we're a little disappointed. Despite Deck Nine's insistence that players enjoyed the first *Life is Strange* for its relationships and relatability, we were glad of the time-manipulation puzzles as a pacing device if nothing else. But there will still be puzzles to solve, lead writer **Zak Garriss** assures us: "Our intent was to make sure that from top to bottom, every aspect of the design and gameplay really fits Chloe."

We watch as our heroine manages to pilfer a band T-shirt: investigating the car they're sold out of reveals

an option to release the handbrake, distracting the vendor. Though we're told that brand-new mechanics are to be revealed soon, this showing is far simpler than the mental gymnastics involved in the game's first season – but this is being pitched as a personal story, not the first game's musing on choice and fate, so perhaps it's fair enough.

And now that decisions aren't able to be rewound, those dialogue choices weigh heavier; some prompts had game-changing ramifications in *Life is Strange*, but many could be hastily recanted. When Amber arrives to protect Price from some thugs she's previously angered, the point's driven home. For fans, this relationship is critical, emotionally charged, yet still shrouded in mystery – and *Before The Storm* will offer the chance to directly impact it. The responsibility is not lost on Deck Nine.

Voice actor Ashly Burch is unable to reprise her role as Price due to her union's strike, but has been brought on as a story consultant in order to ensure an "authentic Chloe", Garriss says.

Unfortunately, *Life is Strange: Before The Storm* can't help but seem weirdly counterfeit, with its reduced mechanics and replacement vocals. Dontnod's game was lightning in a bottle, and a different developer attempting to recapture it is bound to feel a little off. The protagonist's new voice actor does a wonderful impression of Burch, but the fact that it comes across as an impression at all is telling.

This showing is far simpler than the mental gymnastics involved in the game's first season



THE CREW 2

Developer Ivory Tower Publisher Ubisoft Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release 2018

An Ubisoft driving game was the last place we expected to see an Inception reference, but here we all are. We're playing the opening mission of *The Crew 2*, and the Christopher Nolan nod is intended to add a little dramatic spectacle to developer Ivory Tower's grand plan for its open-world sequel: realtime vehicle switching. Using a radial menu and the right analogue stick, you can move in a flash from the driver's seat of a sports car to the cockpit of a light aircraft, and from there to the helm of a sprint boat, then back and forth as you see fit. The reins are a little tighter in this scripted opening mission, however: all the better, it turns out, to bend the scenery about every time you switch.

Out on the open road, the transitions are a little less flashy – which is probably for the best, since seeing the sky crease in two after we moved to the plane had our stomach doing a few barrel rolls of its own. When you're in control of the switch, it's not jarring at all, and the ease of doing it, and the speed at which it happens, make it an easy idea to fall in love with. There are limitations, sure; you can't turn from a car into a boat while you're driving around a city centre, because that would be pointless, and you can't do the reverse when out on the water, because you would die. The

plane is the only constant, and serves as a bridging device between the other two modes of transport – albeit one that lets you cartwheel through the sky from New York to Los Angeles like a sprawling, open-world *Pilotwings*.

Sea travel is a delight, too. You can lean your craft backwards a little to increase its speed at the cost of a little mobility, and you'll certainly want to get out in front, since boats leave wakes that make life difficult for any competitors following your racing line too closely. That said, zig-zagging back and forth over a race leader's wake provides a fuzzy, *Wave Race*-like feeling, and there's always the nitro button if you fall too far behind.

It's quite the tonal shift from *The Crew*, which undermined the obvious potential of its free-wheeling premise with a dark and moody tale of a driver working undercover for the FBI to avenge the murder of his brother. Its structure was a mess, too: a game that promises to give you the freedom of the entire US has no business spending its opening hours confining you to, of all places, Detroit. That lesson has been learned, at least. This time, the entire country is yours from the word go. Providing Ivory Tower has also learned from its narrative mistakes, *The Crew 2* could be a much-needed dose of levity after the strait-laced fidelity of *Forza 7* and co.

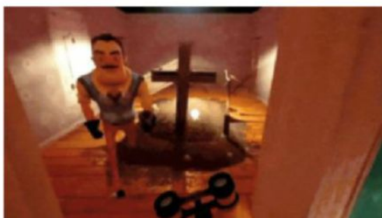
You can move in a flash from the driver's seat of a sports car to the cockpit of a light aircraft



CODE VEIN

Developer Bandai Namco Studios **Publisher** Bandai Namco
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

A closer look at the action-RPG's meaty combat reveals that, phew, it's definitely *Dark Souls* and not *God Eater*. Although our patience for more *Souls*-a-likes is wearing thin, the 'Gift' mechanic – where characters change into weaponised forms – has a tinge of *Bloodborne*'s trick weapons about it. Yes, it's derivative, but get the combo system right and we'll be thirsty for more.



HELLO NEIGHBOR

Developer Dynamic Pixel **Publisher** TinyBuild
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** August 29

A show-floor demo shows that *Hello Neighbor*'s battle to find out what the man next door is doing in his basement – against a foe who learns from your tactics and adapts to thwart future break-in attempts – is as enthralling as ever. Though with a release date rapidly approaching, there's lots of polishing to be done. Still, Microsoft's into it – it's paid up for console exclusivity on Xbox One.



STRANGE BRIGADE

Developer/publisher Rebellion Developments
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

After *Sniper Elite* and *Nazi Zombie Army*, which hoary old movie cliché should Rebellion explore next? Some Indiana Jones-style treasure hunting, apparently. As the studio's house style dictates, it's pulpy, dumb fun, with swarms of mythical creatures to stave off and giant bosses to fight, and support for up to four players in co-op. The studio may work to a formula, but there's no denying it's effective.



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

Developer Monolith Productions **Publisher** Warner Bros
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 10

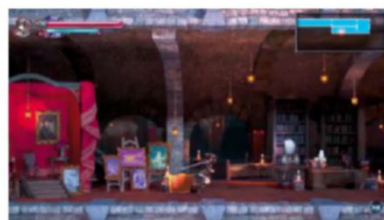
A show-floor demo is no use, really, when you're playing a game whose magic will only truly become clear after dozens of hours spent making friends and enemies. Yet still *Shadow Of War* manages to impress. We immediately fall in love with the Shadow Strike, which sees Talion instantly teleport to an enemy's side after firing a mystical arrow at them. The only black mark is a delay until October.



QUAKE CHAMPIONS

Developer Id Software **Publisher** Bethesda
Format PC **Release** 2017

A brief session on the ongoing beta proved that *Quake Champions* is a very good way of turning the phrase 'you're only as old as you feel' into a negative, but Bethesda must be optimistic about its pacey arena FPS: at E3 it announced a million-dollar tournament to run in August. Meanwhile, in brand-synergy news, *Wolfenstein*'s BJ Blazkowicz has been unveiled as a playable character.



BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

Developer Inti Creates **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC, PS4, PS Vita, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2018

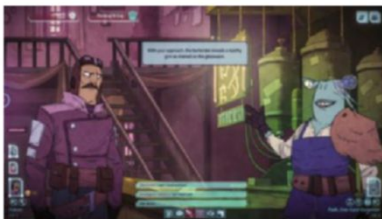
Having previously played the E3 build of the Kickstarter success, we probe further – how faithful to the *Castlevania* legacy is it? Happily, the Easter eggs are there: destructible walls yield powerful maces and loosing a giant bell into the castle floor reveals hidden passages. Adding secrets is a natural, enjoyable and random part of the development process, creator Koji Igarashi tells us.



FIFA 18

Developer/publisher EA (Canada)
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** Sept

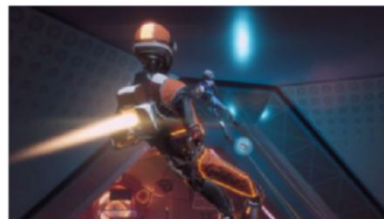
After last year's move to the Frostbite engine, EA found itself lacking a convincing sell for this year's multi-million-selling football game. The result? A claim that a year later, EA Canada's understanding of Frostbite has deepened, so this year's game will be even better. The main lure, however, is a second season for surprisingly likeable story mode *The Journey*, which ended on something of a cliffhanger.



GRIFTLANDS

Developer/publisher Klei Entertainment
Format PC **Release** 2018

Klei's track record is the envy of the indie scene, and while details are scant *Griftlands* looks set to maintain the streak. A party-based, steampunk-styled RPG that alternates between zoomed-out exploration and up-close, turn-based combat, *Griftlands'* hook is that everything is negotiable. It already looks like another essential piece of work from a creative, constantly genre-hopping studio.



LONE ECHO

Developer/publisher Ready At Dawn
Format Rift **Release** Out now

The Order: 1886 developer Ready At Dawn has made quite the tonal shift for its VR debut, which is actually two separate games in the same universe. And we do mean universe. *Lone Echo* is a single-player, story-driven game in outer space; *Echo Arena* is a zero-G multiplayer sport; both were standouts in a quiet E3 for VR. Both will be on sale by the time you read this – review next month.

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HAT'S OFF

How Nintendo is giving a radical
makeover to the most famous face in games

By **NATHAN BROWN**



Game *Super Mario Odyssey*
Developer/publisher
Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release October 27

There's an awful lot of *Breath Of The Wild* in *Super Mario Odyssey*. Sometimes, it's a direct lift: jump into a lake and dive beneath the water, for instance, and Mario borrows Link's stamina wheel, repurposing it as a breath meter. Often, it's in the scenery, in the way a tempting trinket looms on the horizon, far away and out of focus enough to compel closer inspection. It's there in the structure, too. Instead of Stars, here Mario collects Moons to progress, and while plenty are locked away behind tricky platforming sections or boss battles, many are to be found through simple, playful experimentation with your surroundings. A ground pound on a suspicious bump in a rooftop, for example, may yield a Moon, in the same way that dropping an apple into a statue's empty offering tray might sprout a Korok seed. The closest point of comparison between the Switch debuts of Nintendo's most famous videogame faces, however, is a spiritual one. *Super Mario Odyssey*, like *Breath Of The Wild*, is powered by the desire to break its own rules, to playfully thumb its nose at the conventions of its heritage. Like *Breath Of The Wild*, it already appears exceptional.

Odyssey heralds a return to the sandbox values of *Super Mario 64* and *Sunshine* — but 'sandbox' is a western term that doesn't quite do Nintendo's design philosophy justice. It implies a toddler mucking about, a messy, improvisational style of play that often yields wonderful results. Instead, 3D Mario games are built on the concept of hakoniwa: a Japanese miniature garden, built in a small container, its tiny trees and shrubs given contextual scale with small figurines or bits of scenery. Look at the garden from a different perspective, and you find something new. *Breath Of The Wild* was a sprawling, open-air landscape that begged you into its distant corners. *Super Mario Odyssey*, like hakoniwa, is dense and intricate, painstakingly assembled by extremely skilled hands.

"In *Breath Of The Wild*, there's a very wide open space," producer **Yoshiaki Koizumi** tells us. "There's a lot of emphasis on seeing a faraway location, and thinking about how you might get there. But in *Super Mario Odyssey*, the space is more compact. The goals, and the kinds of actions you use, are more about the things that are right in front of you, and how they will interact."

Hakoniwa's influence is most obviously, literally evident in the Wooded Kingdom, a verdant, sun-dappled forest. This, it turns out, is actually a greenhouse, a handmade miniature flower garden whose yield has been stolen by Bowser (the story has the series antagonist kidnap

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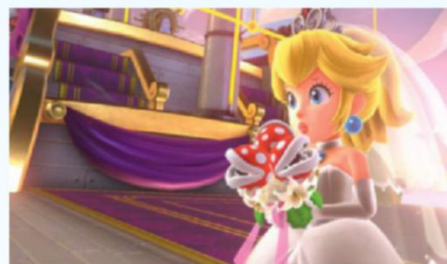
Peach for a purpose this time: they're to be married, and each kingdom has been somehow affected by his wedding plans). Look out towards the horizon and you see a vast mountain range, but you can see the seams in the glass wall that hems you in. At first the kingdom seems small, with a high wall at one side and hedgerows around its perimeter, bordering a drop into the abyss. Yet following a line of coins that lead off a hedge — a route, you assume, to instant death — instead sees you land in the Deep Wood, an entirely new area. Throw a seed in one of the planters dotted around and a huge beanstalk raises up, offering a route back to the upper ground; pick the right ►

one and you'll emerge on the other side of the wall. Use a nearby set of binoculars and you're catapulted high into the sky, panning the camera around to find new routes or objectives, the miniature garden yielding more of its secrets the more angles you look at it from.

None of this, by itself, is particularly new. *Super Mario 64* and *Sunshine* were built along the same lines, albeit subtly changing the level layout for each new objective. But for *Odyssey*, Nintendo has broken the rules of *Mario* in dramatic, fundamental ways. While the layout of these spaces may feel familiar, if you try to traverse them using the traditional Mario moveset — run, jump, bounce — you won't get far.

“Mario games begin development not just with one idea, but many,” Koizumi says. “You’ll have some ideas from previous projects that you weren’t able to incorporate into the final product, and maybe a few new ideas. Once you put them all together you start to see a little bit of a vision about how the game’s going to look and play as a whole. Once you have enough fun ideas, you can start to prototype each of those, play them, and see which ones naturally fall out because they don’t fit, or aren’t as much fun. Before long, you have a game concept that is starting to define itself.”

Mario’s cap has always been important, even if it was originally designed out of necessity, since Nintendo’s coders couldn’t work out how to make his hair move realistically when he jumped in *Donkey Kong*. Along with his moustache, his pot belly and the buttons on his overalls, it is a defining characteristic of one of gaming’s most iconic silhouettes. Remember the shock of seeing it stolen, or blown off by a strong wind, in *Super Mario 64*, the first time you’d seen the head of hair beneath? That was intended to demean Mario, to rob him of his essence, and his power — he took more damage without it, and could no longer use special abilities. Losing it in *Mario Sunshine* exposed him to the elements, causing him to gradually lose health. In *Super Mario Odyssey*, our hero willingly, constantly gives it away — and doing so makes him immeasurably, transformatively stronger. ►



MAIN Fire and Hammer Koopas don’t walk; rather, they move about with small, adorable hops. RIGHT Mario as a dinosaur: the most surprising sight of E3 2017. ABOVE We know Nintendo likes to plan ahead, but surely it’s a coincidence that its UK PR team sent Piranha Plant flowers as Valentine’s gifts a few years back



SWITCH UP

Nintendo's share price reached an eight-year high shortly after E3, with investors buoyed by the success of Switch, *Zelda* and the positive reception to *Odyssey*. As a result, producer Yoshiaki Koizumi's stock within Nintendo must have risen too: he also led the hardware project that led to Switch. How does he feel about the console's success? "It's half expected and half surprised. I always feel a certain amount of confidence in my work, and I imagine a lot of different scenarios. The one that's come to fruition was one of the better ones I was imagining!" He believes Switch's flexibility has been key to the console's success, but ultimately thinks that one core tenet of the hardware's design has resonated strongly with early adopters: "We wanted people to have more time to play games."



CAP IN HAND

While there's no full co-op mode as seen in Mario's previous outing, Wii U's *Super Mario 3D World*, you can hand off half a Joy-Con to a partner. This leaves you guiding Mario while giving your accomplice full control of Cappy using the analogue stick. While Nintendo's E3 demo doesn't exactly make a compelling case for the feature – Cappy struggles to keep up with Mario if he moves to higher ground, and gets stuck easily behind scenery – it certainly makes some challenges easier. We struggle when, in singleplayer, we're invited to pick up a set of musical notes set on the fronds of two palm trees within a tight time limit. With a second player, it's a relative breeze.



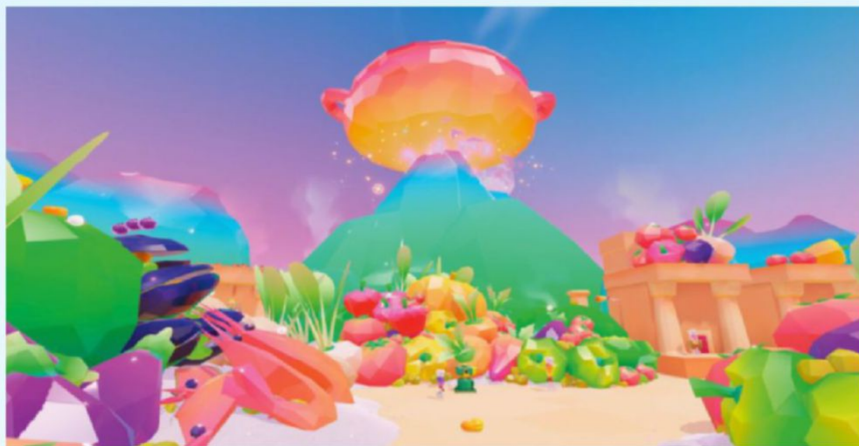
TOP The Sand Kingdom is frozen in places, causing Mario to shiver – though as in *Breath Of The Wild*, clothing can address that. ABOVE The prehistoric Cascade Kingdom, home to T Rex and, we assume, other dinosaurs. RIGHT Wooded Kingdom is more vertical than its name implies, with heights only Uproots can reach, and the Deep Woods below





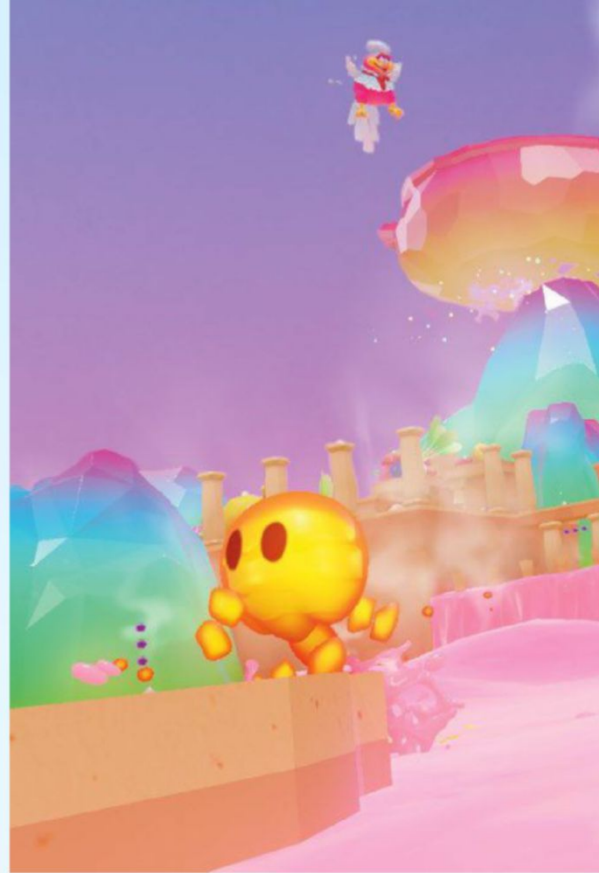
HAT'S OFF

LEFT Cap Kingdom's black, white and gold look mirrors the interior of Mario's Odyssey ship. BELOW The sickly sweet Luncheon Kingdom. BOTTOM Metro Kingdom is peppered with nods to Donkey Kong; Pauline, the original game's damsel in distress, is mayor of New Donk City





ABOVE Sand Kingdom features these 8bit-styled 2D sections; the music shifts to chiptune, too. RIGHT Further evidence of the way the capture mechanic subverts series tradition. Possess a Lava Bubble and this poison lake poses Mario no trouble. BELOW Capture a Goomba and, by jumping on others, you can form a tower





Now, Mario's cap is a character in and of itself. With either a button press or Joy-Con motions, Cappy can be flung out in front of Mario; it'll come back to him instantly, but it can also be kept in place to serve as an impromptu platform, or moved around to whack enemies and collect coins. Chuck it at a Piranha Plant in the Wooded Kingdom and it'll try and gobble Cappy up, no longer able to spit troublesome blobs of poison that pool on the ground while it's chowing down. Fling it at one of those troublesome, evasive rabbits, and you'll stun it for a moment, making one of the series' most infuriatingly flighty opponents a little easier to pin down.

Cappy's real purpose, however, is to power the capture mechanic, which is where Nintendo really rips up the timeworn *Mario* rulebook. Throw it at one of a huge number of enemies or bits of scenery and Mario will possess it, temporarily adorning it with his iconic hat and moustache. Suddenly he's a Goomba, a Koopa or a Bullet Bill; he's a frog or a T Rex; he's a bollard, a Christmas tree, a tank. Each comes with its own moveset or ability, or will solve a puzzle. A Goomba's boots won't slip on icy ground, for instance, while a Bullet Bill can be used to traverse large gaps. Bollards are springy, and can be used to fling yourself long distances; Mario will hit the ground running, arms out to the side like aeroplane wings to emphasise the boost in speed.

The results are twofold. It challenges the way you think about traversing a Mario level, and sets Nintendo's design teams free after three decades of being hemmed in by the arc of the protagonist's various jumps. New enemies have been introduced, or old ones brought back, specifically for the opportunities they offer when captured. In the Sand Kingdom, for instance, Moe-Eyes (a variation on *Super Mario Land*'s Tokotoko statues) can see hidden platforms when they put their sunglasses on. In the Wooded Kingdom, Uproots can grow high into the sky to reach lofty platforms.

Uproots are adorable creatures, at first walking around with a plant pot on their heads that must be knocked off before they can be captured. "One rule we set up," says game director **Kenta Motokura**, "is you can't capture enemies with a hat on. No one wears two hats, right?" Motokura admits that the ►

capture mechanic brings its own set of challenges (“We hope no one will break the sequence of the game itself,” he says) and as we play we can see the new little balancing acts to keep players in check. Bullet Bills will explode after a time, for instance, to ensure you can’t just fly from one end of the level to the other. While Cappy can pick up coins in flight, he can’t collect Moons — Mario has to get there to finish the job. These are subtle, but vital, limitations ensuring that Mario’s new power is groundbreaking, without being game-breaking.

All that combines into a game that, like *Breath Of The Wild*, thrums to the rhythm of curiosity and discovery. *Odyssey*, too, is a game about seeing something that piques your interest, and working out how to get there. Here, however, chances are that the solution will involve throwing your cap at something, and that what follows will be something you’ve never done in a *Mario* game before. It is, like its Switch stablemate, utterly intoxicating.

Nintendo’s desire to break the *Mario* mould spreads far beyond Mario’s massively expanded powers, too. For a start, this is the first time we’ve seen him outside the Mushroom Kingdom, rubbing shoulders with salarymen in suits, creeping around dozing dinosaurs, flying from one new place to another in an airship shaped like a top hat. *Odyssey* also does away with the lives system, with death seeing you deposited at the most recent checkpoint in exchange for a fee of 10 coins. With no need for extra lives, coins themselves have at last been rethought, and now actually matter. There are two currencies: gold coins, of which the supply is theoretically infinite; and a local currency unique to each world, of which 100 are cosseted about the place in fixed locations. Both are used to buy souvenirs and trinkets to decorate Mario’s ship, the *Odyssey*, and to buy new outfits.

Yep, outfits. If you thought the sight of Mario as a dinosaur, Cheep Cheep or Goomba was mad, just wait until you see him in a pinstripe suit and fedora, a builder’s hard hat and overalls, or a wetsuit and snorkel. At first, it seems like sacrilege. Then, it’s funny. Before long you’re scurrying around levels ignoring everything but coins so you can buy your next outfit, and it just feels *right*. “Mario is a strong

IP,” Motokura says. “Wherever he goes, whatever he wears, he’s Mario.” So it proves.

This, you’d think, would have been a tough sell within Nintendo a few years ago. But the relative failure of Wii U and 3DS appears to have made the management realise it was time for some fresh thinking. With that has come a sort of changing of the guard. While Eiji Aonuma remains the figurehead for the *Zelda* series, *Breath Of The Wild* was made under Hidemaro Fujibayashi’s direction. While we still most readily associate *Mario* games with Shigeru Miyamoto, *Odyssey* is being produced by Koizumi, with Motokura as director. Fujibayashi spent most of his career at Capcom, working on *Zelda* games; Motokura began his time at Nintendo

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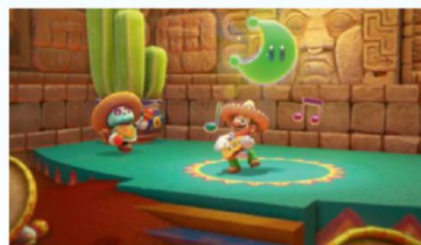
as an artist on *Super Mario Galaxy*. It is hard not to draw a direct line between the promotion of (relatively) youthful exuberance and the playful rule-breaking of the games that have resulted from it.

“Generations turn over,” Koizumi says, “and when you’re working on games like these, you can’t have the same veterans on everything forever. Any time that you have a new generation working on games, they’re always going to think about the things that are close to them, and incorporate those into the game somehow. That definitely changes the way the games feel.” He’s half right — *Mario* games always feel wonderful. *Odyssey*, however, is something more. The last time Nintendo re-thought, from the ground up, how a *Mario* game should work, it resulted in one of the greatest games ever made. *Odyssey* promises the most transformative change this beloved series has known since *Super Mario 64*. Suddenly, October seems like a lifetime away. ■





LEFT It's not all about capturing: *Odyssey* may break the rules, but you can still bounce on baddies' heads. ABOVE Bowser's henchmen are a wedding-planning firm, Broodal. MAIN Power lines are a speedy way of getting around Metro Kingdom



ABOVE Finally, the Mario/Mariachi pun opportunity we've been waiting for all these years. LEFT Cappy in his native, top-hat form. Mario's ship, the *Odyssey*, is styled in similar fashion



E A S T E R N



P R O M I S E

The battle to own videogaming's largest
and fastest-changing PC games market

By **SIMON PARKIN**

上 On November 27, 2016, on a hazy evening in Shanghai, China, at a glittering event to celebrate the launch of *Final Fantasy XV* Jian Wu struck up a conversation with a stranger at the bar. The man introduced himself to Wu, a videogame developer who lives in the city whose name has been changed to protect his identity, as a senior manager from Tencent, the gigantic Chinese investment company which owns major holdings in major game studios around the globe, from Supercell to Activision, Epic to Riot. After some small talk, during which the manager boasted about Tencent's grand plans to integrate VR into its digital store, he smiled, leaned in and told Wu: "We are working with the government and, when the time is right, Steam will not exist in China anymore."

For the past two years Steam and Tencent have been locked in a battle to establish the pre-eminent digital PC game store in China. Since 2015 the number of Chinese Steam users has increased from six million to an estimated 17 million, many of whom were reportedly lured onto the platform in order to download *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. Valve's store, which recently added the option to pay for games in Chinese currencies, however, operates in a legal grey area. Every videogame that's sold in China is supposed to be signed off by SAPPRFT, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China. Steam, which does not have approval to operate in China, offers millions of Chinese PC owners a back door through which they can access tens of thousands of foreign games that haven't

indelible cliché is that Chinese game-playing habits are focused almost entirely on free-to-play titles built quickly and cheaply. It's a perspective, in part, rooted in fact (China, for example, is alone in having its own free-to-play version of *Call Of Duty*). While the celebrated auteurs and directors at Japanese studios are routinely praised for their artistic vision, their near Eastern counterparts are broadly nameless and faceless (those whose names are familiar, such as Jenova Chen, emigrated to America to make their fortunes). Chinese talent is perceived to be found in the crafting of ruthless monetisation techniques designed to make a quick Yuan, rather than needle-nudging artistry.

This perspective seems increasingly outdated. Free-to-play games still represent the most popular and profitable videogames in China, but the mobile-game sector makes up just half of the Chinese game market. Since the lifting of a nationwide console ban in 2015, and the rise of a burgeoning middle class with plentiful disposable income, the console market is growing. Widespread PC ownership is taking a generation of young players out of the internet cafés where for the past decade most games have been played, and into the home, where tastes are, thanks to Steam, seemingly expanding to foreign games. Piracy, long seen as the scourge of the Chinese market, may still be rampant, but sales of full-price, legitimate games are increasing. A recent report from NetEase, Blizzard's long-time partner in China, states that more than five million copies of *Overwatch* were sold in mainland China alone, a record for a so-called buy-to-play game in the country. What's changing?

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been subject to the country's strict approval procedures. It could be, at any moment, shut down.

The relationship between Tencent, which on April 20 announced the rebrand of its digital PC games store to WeGame, and the Chinese government is markedly different, allegedly characterised, as the man at the bar put it, by conspiratorial collaboration. "Tencent is not a business as you know businesses in the west," Wu told me. "It is essentially an extension of the official Party. They are beholden to stakeholders but the line between the board and government is thin. Some of Tencent's stakeholders are high-ranking officials in the party." (Neither Valve nor Tencent responded to repeated requests to take part in this article.)

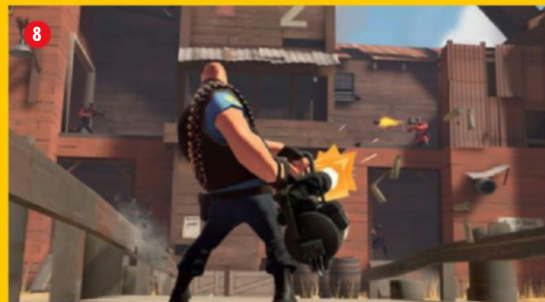
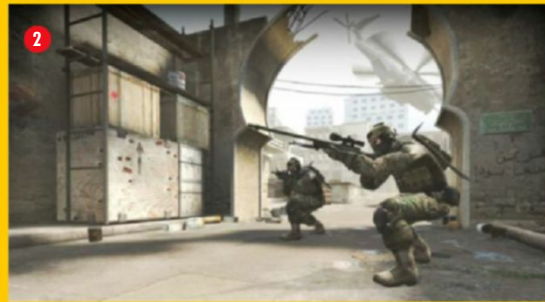
The competition between Tencent and Steam is stratospherically high stakes. According to the authors of the Global Games Market Report, a benchmark piece of research published annually, the Chinese videogames market is now worth an estimated \$27.5 billion. China is the largest videogame market in the world, accounting for a quarter of all global revenue generated by the industry. It comfortably outstrips North America, the second largest, by more than two billion dollars. According to the report's authors, China will remain the most significant game market for the foreseeable future. While its growth is slowing, the value of the Chinese games industry is set to continue rising, to an estimated \$28.9 billion by 2019.

Despite these numbers, the Chinese videogame market remains, in the west, somewhat enigmatic. Few Chinese games have found widespread mainstream success outside of Asia. The seemingly

Yuli Zhao is vice-president of Youzu, a Shanghai company founded in 2009 that has grown steadily to become one of the top three Chinese publishers of mobile phone games. Zhao, who is 35, was born in the southern Chinese province of Fujian. Her experience of videogames growing up was typical of people of her generation. Zhao's family did not own a console, so she'd play games with her brothers exclusively in local arcades or cyber cafés. "When I was growing up playing games was a social hobby, almost like a family event," she says. "I still remember the joy I felt when we'd play *Age Of Empires*, *Red Alert* and *Heroes Of Might And Magic*."

That notorious ban on videogame consoles, which was in place for 15 years, shaped not only Zhao's experience, but also the entire Chinese videogame industry – in profound ways. In June 2000 the Chinese Ministry of Culture issued a notice that forbade any company or individual from producing and selling electronic game equipment and accessories in China. The legislation was written, according to Zhao, in response to the "fast growth of the cyber café" and its perceived negative influence upon young people. "The Chinese government claimed that game consoles were affecting the mental health of children," says Daniel Ahmed, an analyst for Niko Partners, a company that has studied the Chinese videogame market for 15 years.

In reality the ban was ineffectual and weakly enforced. "In Shenzhen, we always had lots of smuggled consoles and corresponding games," Wensen Zeng, an employee at Riot Games who was ten years old when the ban was implemented, tells us. "Even though we didn't own a PlayStation 2 at home, I could ►



The ten most popular games on Steam in China according to steamspy.com, as of June 30:

- 1 Dota 2
- 2 Counter-Strike: Global Offensive
- 3 H1Z1: King Of The Kill
- 4 Grand Theft Auto V
- 5 Left 4 Dead 2
- 6 Wallpaper Engine
- 7 Don't Starve
- 8 Team Fortress 2
- 9 Unturned
- 10 Warframe

always find one to play on in the local mall or cyber café." Some console manufacturers pursued creative ways around the restriction. In 2003 Nintendo released the iQue Player, a \$60 console developed in conjunction with software developer Wei Yen, that allowed players to download games purchased at local retailers onto a 64MB flash memory card. The iQue's design may have helped it slip the attention of the Chinese authorities, but for Nintendo the greater point was to provide a cheap entry point to China's populace. "To reach a wide range of people in China, especially those inland who are not as rich as those in coastal areas, we thought we needed to deliver a cheaper console," said the late Nintendo president **Satoru Iwata** in 2003.

Iwata's ploy was, broadly, a failure. Piracy of both games and consoles proved to be a far greater challenge than the ban. Nintendo's Wii, which was never sold in China, was copied by a Chinese company and released under the name Vii, a game system that ran preloaded motion-controlled games. A counterfeit version of Sony's PlayStation 3 was sold under the bewildering name The Winner. According to Niko Partners, around 50 per cent of time spent playing videogames in China between 2002 and 2005 was on standalone games that were either downloaded for free, or bought from pirate stores.

Inexplicably, the ban of 2000 did not extend to PC or mobile gaming. As such, its effects on the market were immediate and transformative, to both business and artistry. Within 12 months the value of the Chinese online videogame marketplace had grown to

you can save progress on one system and continue with the next. This method of design has proved extremely popular, driving sales on both platforms."

Consoles remain something of a niche because of the major historical barriers to entry. A generation was brought up playing pirated games, often on knockoff machines. It's a culture that Sony and Microsoft have struggled to break since both companies entered the Chinese market in 2014. By the end of 2015, legal sales of the Xbox One and PS4 amounted to just half a million units combined, a tiny fraction of the 45 million global sales of both machines. The times, however, are changing.

Bradford Hinkle joined the videogame industry as a designer after working as an abstractor for fracking companies in the UK. He now lives in Shanghai, where he works as a designer on *Call Of Duty: Siege*, Activision's free-to-play iOS game based on the company's marquee IP. When Hinkle arrived in China, he immediately saw that the mindset surrounding game development was wildly different to the west. "Many of the people I have worked with in China have never played a console before," he says. "Some didn't know who Mario was until *Super Mario Run* came out last year." As well as the Chinese-English language barrier, Hinkle discovered a rift in game vocabulary between the two cultures. "There simply isn't a common language for discussing games because our personal experiences tend to be so vastly different," he says. "This means conversations in development often boil down to the lowest common denominator: what makes money?"

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\$100 million. "The Chinese game industry basically skipped the console-game phase," says Zhao. "This allowed PC, web and mobile games to flourish and evolve, to a far greater degree than elsewhere in the world. Restricted access to western videogames after the 1980s meant that a generation of players and designers were most heavily influenced by the design of Asian MMOs. As a result, PVP gameplay is more popular than narrative-led games."

Legislative conditions combined with socioeconomic factors to establish free-to-play as the dominant model. "China is still a developing country so not everyone has \$60 to spend on a game, or pay a monthly subscription to one," Ahmed explains. "As the majority of PC games were played in internet cafés, people couldn't save their game progress without difficulty, so free-to-play games, where your progress was stored on servers remotely, flourished." The monetisation model duly matured much more quickly in China than elsewhere. "There's no sense here that free-to-play is a scam, because it's the reason that most people were able to play games at all," he says.

The console ban was lifted in July 2015, but its effects linger. The most popular mobile phone games tend to be based on classic PC game IPs. "PC games have transitioned over to mobile fairly successfully," says Ahmed. "They haven't been dumbed down to be match-three games. One of the most popular games, *Honour Of Kings*, is a *League Of Legends*-type game that has been adapted from PC for mobile." *Honour Of Kings* attracts more than 50 million players a day. "What's pretty cool is that companies have made mobile versions that interact with the PC game," Ahmed says, "so

In the past two years, however, Hinkle has noticed a major shift. "Countless studios are going under and many are starting to realise that you cannot just make a game that monetises well; you also need to find an audience that actually wants to play your game," he says. "I think a lot of Chinese gamers are burnt out by the same old heavy-handed free-to-play mechanics. They're looking for something new that doesn't punish them for not spending mid-game session. It makes sense that games like *Rocket League* and *Overwatch* are doing so well here. They scratch a competitive itch that many Chinese gamers are used to, but also encapsulate all the highs and lows of a competitive match into a single game session without asking the users to spend money to be number one."

The rise of digital stores has led to surprise, breakout hits for western developers who have seen their games become cult hits in the region. When Tencent put the Canadian developer Klei Entertainment's survival game *Don't Starve* on its digital store, the game sold more than a million copies in one month. Steam's uncertain future may, however, present an insurmountable barrier to western developers hoping to replicate this kind of success simply by translating their game into Mandarin. "Steam does not have approval to operate in China," Ahmed says. "The games don't have approval. China mandates that all games must be approved by a government body before they're allowed to be sold."

These guidelines are fairly loose, but enable the government to ban anything SAPPFT deems to be offensive, counter to 'family values', to incite hatred, or promote violence or drug use. There is no equivalent to the ESRB or PEGI rating system for games in China.

When it comes to whether or not a videogame is cleared for launch, SAPPRFT issues a binary 'yes' or 'no'. According to Ahmed a game like *GTAV* would not pass approval without significant changes. Yet Rockstar's blockbuster is freely available in China via Steam. "It's not easy to get approval of PC games into China," says Zhao. "The process can be tedious." Still, this may be the only option for foreign developers who do not want to sign deals with Tencent, which is rumoured to offer revenue share deals as low as 20 per cent to game developers. "We should expect the Chinese government to regulate or even block the platform soon," Ahmed says. "Any developer hoping to find success outside of Steam should seriously investigate whether or not their game will be approved for sale."

It's not the regulations that have hindered the indie game scene in China, however, which remains small and nascent. Zhao believes it's an area that is likely to experience growth in coming years. "More publishers and channels are looking for creative content from indie developers," she says. "Two years ago, you could find very few indie developers in China. Nobody paid them much attention as the potential profits from indie games were seen as much lower than with big-budget games. But now publishers are turning to indies to find creative work at a relatively low cost."

Few share Zhao's optimism. If Tencent is able to solidify its monopoly it will likely stifle indies. With 800 million installed users on its WeChat platform, a super-app which allows Tencent to directly advertise to an audience of a size unrivalled anywhere outside of Facebook, the company is able to make its own version of any

and curated for the population allowed to be successful," Hinkle says. "Tangibly, if a developer is really trying to find success in the PC market in China, as long as your game is localised properly and optimised for a generally lower target PC spec, you can expect to see sales in China."

"I think it is easy to look at the mobile-play statistics in China and correlate that to a genuine user preference for mobile gaming," continues Hinkle. "But it's a bit like saying Americans prefer Ham and Cheese over a ploughman's lunch. In reality most Americans have just never had a ploughman's, and most Chinese have never had enough spare room, disposable income, and lack of parental oversight to buy a PC gaming rig. So at present in China, games are still synonymous with mobile phones. But this is changing. With 1.4 billion people, even small demographics, by gross percentage, can constitute a massive market."

If Tencent successfully lobbies the Chinese government to ban Steam in the country, it will, as of today, have an almost unchallenged monopoly in the Chinese market, one that could be leveraged to attract developers, expand the company's portfolio, market test its own sales structures, and roll out products which can be internationally successful. "Tencent is very good at playing the long game," Hinkle said, who is critical of what he sees as a State-affiliated company's prioritisation of profit over craft and artistic investment. "Its growth trajectory has always been determined by where users can be absorbed, not making games and certainly not by empowering developers to reach players."

更多的发布商和渠道正在寻找来自独立开发人员的创意内容

upstart indie hit and market it in vast bulk. In 2012, one indie RPG developer took to Reddit to complain that their game had been cloned and uploaded to Tencent's store. Whoever was responsible, the developer wrote, "took our files, reverse-engineered the server, and hosted the game themselves with Chinese translations. They stole years of our hard work. We have no idea how many users they have or how much money they're making, but they have a high rating on that site and they might be profiting off the stolen game more than we are." (Tencent's international head of PR responded at the time, saying: "Our legal department is monitoring the situation and, if found to be a case of infringement, will act on it.")

"The risk for any indie developer is that a huge company will straight copy your idea and use way better channels to distribute the game," Riot's Zeng says. Even aside from the issue of cloning, which has also plagued western digital stores, there are structural hurdles to overcome for any Chinese indie. "It's tough for indie devs to find huge success in China because of the way in which regulations are run," Ahmed says. "There's lots of paperwork to get games approved even before you face marketing and distribution."

Until Steam is banned or regulated, the store is, according to Hinkle, changing Chinese tastes. "The gulf between Chinese gaming preferences and the rest of the world is clearly shrinking," he says. "Steam has exposed millions of Chinese to games which would otherwise been banned by censors." According to the analytics tool Steamspy, six of the same top ten games on the platform are shared in both the US and China. "Once Steam is officially banned in China, we will once again see only what is legal

If Steam is banned in China, Tencent will have the funding and government backing to survive for years, regardless of whether or not the venture proves immediately profitable. Its pockets are unfathomably deep: in September 2016 the company surpassed China Mobile Ltd to become China's most valuable corporation, with a market value of HK\$1.99 trillion (£197 billion). During this time, Tencent will be able to steadily grow its userbase, in much the same way it has done with WeChat. Ahmed is unconvinced that Tencent will be left to monopolise the Chinese PC games market unchallenged; it is by no means the only big success story in China, and its competitors have not failed to notice the opportunities games present. "Even if Tencent is able to shut down Steam there are plenty of huge entrants to the market coming," he says. Alibaba, the Chinese equivalent to Amazon which recently became the most valuable company in Asia, is due to sell PC games via a digital store, for example, while Wonder Cinemas, which is owned by the major American cinema chain AMC (itself owned by AMC Entertainment Holdings, Inc, a company majority-owned by Chinese conglomerate Dalian Wanda Group) is rumoured to be entering the videogame market soon. "Whatever happens I believe there will be lots of healthy competition and room for growth," says Ahmed.

For Hinkle, however, the future looks worrying. "Steam is not without its flaws," he says. "But the alternative creeping over the horizon is an impassive, non-transparent juggernaut with a deeply authoritarian regime backing it financially and leading it by proxy. The potential of a future where Beijing's censors influence what games we play is very real." ■

THE MAKING OF . . .



WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

How a bit of fishy business inspired Giant Sparrow's sublime anthology

By **CHRIS SCHILLING**

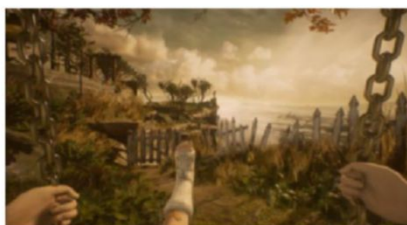
Format PC, PS4
Developer Giant Sparrow
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Origin US
Release 2017

Like all good stories, it started with a shark in a tree. Giant Sparrow had begun developing its debut, *The Unfinished Swan*, with nothing more than what writer/director **Ian Dallas** describes as “an abstract but describable goal”. For that game, Dallas hoped to create a sense of awe and wonder; this time he was hoping to evoke “the sublime horror of nature”. The process had worked once, so Dallas and his team were emboldened to try a similar approach for its successor, but it wasn’t until three or four months into development that the image of a shark in a forest, falling 30 or 40 feet to the ground, came into his head. Nature’s sublime horror suddenly had a comedic edge, and the story of young Molly Finch – the first of this familial anthology – gradually took shape.

If the developer’s original plans had come to fruition, you might have encountered this fish out of water in its natural habitat. In its nascent form, *What Remains Of Edith Finch* was a scuba-diving simulator, inspired by Dallas’s memories of growing up in Washington state, and particularly “what it felt like looking at the ocean sloping away into the infinite darkness.” But in attempting to capture the sensations Dallas had experienced beneath the surface, Giant Sparrow hit its first major snag. “It’s really hard to tell a story while scuba diving,” he concedes. “Like, who is talking? What are the stakes? What’s the ticking clock? All these things that any story has to grapple with were hard to do.” Still, while the idea was abandoned, one early experimental prototype was a success. In considering how to tell a story in an undersea setting, Dallas wondered about inserting text into the world: a feature that not only remains in the finished game, but became crucial to the player being able to easily navigate the Finch mansion.

It was only right that Molly’s flight of fancy should come first in the story chronology, Dallas tells us, since everything grew organically from it. That key line, spoken with childlike guilelessness (“and suddenly I was a shark”) now seems like a disarmingly candid acknowledgement of the game’s unlikely origins. “It’s an introduction to the player, just like it was an introduction to us as developers, into what this game is going to feel like,” Dallas says.

This ambitious, elaborate sequence, during which you first assume the form of a cat and an owl, and then later control a slithering tentacle belonging to some eldritch abomination, was



Over time, Dallas realised that keeping the mechanics simple was key. “Most games are setting up systems they’re going to explore for the next 2-20 hours. [Here] it’s

originally conceived as the template for all that would follow. The studio invested months of programming time in developing technology to infinitely wrap terrain, so that nine tiles’ worth of forest could continually follow on from one another, endlessly rotating like the treads of a tank. “We ended up making this system where you didn’t have any walls, [so] you could keep

“EVEN WHEN YOU THINK YOU KNOW WHERE AN INDIVIDUAL STORY IS GOING, IT MIGHT HAVE A RIGHT TURN”

going forever and the world would appear in front of you. And then we ended up never using that again,” he laughs. “That’s typical of the excess of Molly’s story, that exuberance early in development of, ‘We’ll try this and we’ll try that’. But it’s also the perfect introduction to what the game is, in that it is constantly reinventing itself. Even when you think you know where an individual story is going to go, it might have a hard right turn a few minutes later.”

The contrast between the vast, sprawling outdoors and the elaborate interiors of the Finches’ house are stark, and yet there’s still a hint of something monstrous inside; Edith herself likens it to “a smile with too many teeth”. Dallas had three words in mind when designing the house: sublime, intimate and murky. And while he’s not convinced the game quite delivered on the last of those three, he’s happy that Giant Sparrow struck a balance between the first two.

“I think that’s most represented in the clutter on the walls,” he says. “A real house goes from being barren, where there’s nothing on the walls and it feels sterile and even videogamey, to being lived-in where you’ve got a couple of photos on the walls and that sort of thing. And then there’s this tipping point where you add too many things, too many photos and memorabilia, and it hits this point where it starts to feel like a natural force. It begins to look almost like the bark of a tree; something that has an order to it, but it’s too chaotic for us to be able to follow.”

Players are already primed to anticipate a kind of threat as they arrive: Edith is, after all, investigating the seemingly fanciful notion of a curse that is causing the Finches to die prematurely. It had been conceived as an anthology of stories from the early stages of development: one early concept placed Edith within a group of high-school students sharing tales with one another, before Dallas landed on the idea of a family and began to seek ways to tie them all together. Again, he looked towards the world of horror for inspiration. “The Twilight Zone has this continuity,” he begins. “I mean, it’s not really obvious what it is that Rod Serling and the music provides, but there’s a gestalt that unites these stories. So it became about finding a [narrative] throughline so that these stories didn’t feel completely random. Because it felt like they were all exploring similar themes.”

Dallas also looked at Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years Of Solitude* for structural inspiration, and found, once a couple of stories were in place, that interleaving them would allow Giant Sparrow to kill two birds with one stone. “We discovered a year or two into development that having the same locations and characters reappear was really powerful,” he says. “It wasn’t like we were just saving assets to use between stories; it was something that made the stories feel more interesting and specific to our game.” But the curse itself was a retcon. “Once we knew that all the stories were going to be about people dying, then [we had] to try and figure out a way to explain that.”

Yet the studio’s momentum could so easily have been derailed by a change of publisher. Having partnered with Sony in January 2013, the game being officially unveiled during 2014’s PlayStation Experience, it found itself without a publisher when the format-holder’s focus shifted ►

THE MAKING OF...

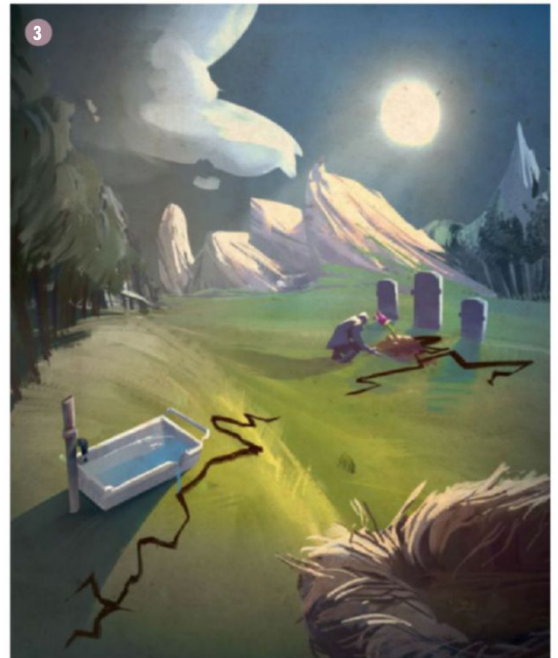
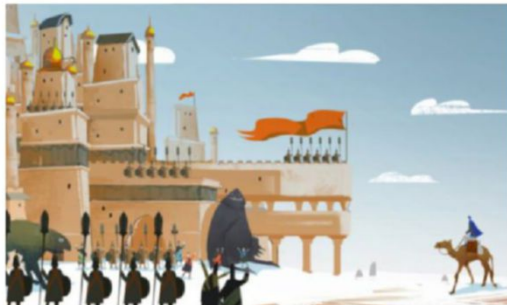
away from indies. Fortunately, the transition to Annapurna Interactive in May of last year was a smooth one, thanks largely to the fact that several of the producers Dallas had been working with at Sony Santa Monica had moved across to Annapurna in the interim. "Four or five of the people that we interacted with most on a day-to-day basis had moved there," he recalls. And they had liked what we were doing before, and they just wanted us to continue, and perhaps to do a little bit more of it than we would have otherwise."

As a result, two of the game's standout sequences were preserved. A more demanding original schedule would, Dallas admits, probably have led to some stories being cut, the two most likely candidates being those of Gregory and Lewis Finch. If you've played the game, you'll understand what a loss they would have been. "They ended up in places we were really happy with," Dallas says, "But they were not sure things for a long, long time. They were really hard to pull off."

In the former case, there were worries, too, from Sony about how players might react to seeing a baby in peril. "People there who were parents were the ones who objected the most," Dallas explains. "It was just about making sure that it was handled with the [appropriate] gravity and that it was respectful. That was definitely a concern early on." But until all the disparate parts came together during the late stages of development, he admits it didn't seem like it would be an emotionally demanding game to play. "You spend so much time looking at this thing as a bunch of designer art, with these crude models [where] there's no music or sound effects and it crashes every 10 seconds, and you don't take it that seriously when you look at it as a prototype," he recalls. "It's only at the end when it actually comes together that you think, 'Oh, right, this is a real thing now.'"

Perhaps more significantly still, *Giant Sparrow* would have been forced to cut the story Dallas calls the game's "capstone". The tale of Edith's brother, Lewis, who drifts away from his job chopping fish heads at a local cannery into an imaginative fantasy world, it's arguably the most enthralling use of systems to communicate a story – and in this case, a character's mental state – since Josef Fares' *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*. A combination of an early ship date and the complexity of the sequence meant its fate hung





1 Various concepts for the cannery where Lewis works. His was the story that went through the most structural changes. "The biggest problem throughout was that we thought we needed a lot more to keep players engaged," Dallas says. "It took us a long time to realise that we didn't have to make it that complicated."

2 Concepts for the scenes in Lewis's imagination. Dallas: "At one point there was going to be combat with various monsters and travelling across the desert, and it was also going to be much more explicitly videogame-related. The story had initially been set in the present day, but then we moved it back in time to the 1920s or '30s and so the videogame references no longer made any sense. It was late in development when we moved it back into the present day, where those references would have made more sense, but it was already too late."

3 Early designs for the house's puzzles were more magical than realistic. Lead designer Chris Bell conceived this prototype, in which the player slid a picture frame around a wall mural to help bring the scene to life.

4 In Molly's story, players briefly control an owl chasing rabbits. In earlier versions, you swooped to catch moles that would appear from holes in the ground



THE MAKING OF...

in the balance for some time, as it went through several iterations. And then Giant Sparrow's lead gameplay programmer left the project. Happily, his replacement saved the day. "We hired somebody new, who was amazing," Dallas says. "The whole movement of the fish when you're chopping had been fiddly and annoying and took a lot of focus, but our new programmer completely rewrote the way that it worked and suddenly it all started to gel."

Meanwhile, a sublime horror of a very different kind factored into one of the other vignettes. The tragic tale of Barbara, a child star, is told within the pages of a grisly comic book; the surprise birthday party within the story came first, before Dallas turned his attention toward *Tales From The Crypt* and John Carpenter's *Halloween*. He invited composer Jeff Russo to supply a version of the latter's iconic theme, before wondering if it might be possible to obtain the rights for the real thing. Dallas even planned to ask Carpenter if he would voice the story's narrator, though the SAG strike put paid to that idea. "I didn't actually talk to John Carpenter [directly]," Dallas says. "I don't know if it's partly because he's a big videogame nerd, but it was pretty straightforward. We asked; he said yes."

It's one of several playful flourishes in a game that, despite its subject matter, avoids lapsing into mawkishness. This was evidently one of Dallas's biggest concerns, and it informed a number of storytelling choices, right down to the last line. "I was really nervous about any maudlin sentimentality, maybe to the game's detriment," he says. "One of the things we talked about a lot, right up until we shipped, was what Edith should say at the very end of the game – like, her last line. But I just feel it's really manipulative to have something that is consciously trying to pull at your heartstrings like that. It's ultimately unnecessary and kind of shoddy. For me, it starts and ends with empathy – it's about creating a space where you are encouraged and allowed the time to feel empathy for someone else."

The game's anthological approach is clearly one Dallas would like to revisit in future, going as far as to suggest he'd love to see a group of developers collaborating on some kind of horror miscellany: the ludic equivalent of *The ABCs Of Death* series or found-footage collection *V/H/S*. "It's worked really well for us," he says. "I love that it gives you a chance to get in and out of

Q&A

Ian Dallas
Writer/director



Which of the stories went through the most changes?

Walter's. Essentially, it was a riff on the *Weeping Angels* story from *Doctor Who* and also *The Prisoner*. There's this guy trying to escape this strange world of 1950s Americana, and he walks around with a flashlight, and when he turns around this crowd of people with pitchforks gets a little closer. Then there's a gradual reveal that you're actually in a model train set, and this giant hand comes down periodically to move things around. Walter picks up this little person who had tried to escape, and then realises that he himself has to escape and then goes out the tunnel [as in the finished game]. The version we shipped with was the last 5% of this absurd dream, and the whole can-opening part was a very late part of that process.

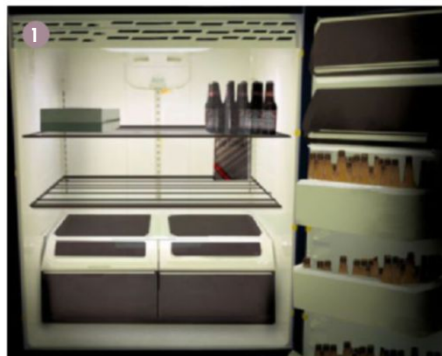
Were you consciously trying to avoid the audio-log approach to storytelling?

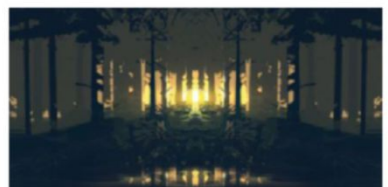
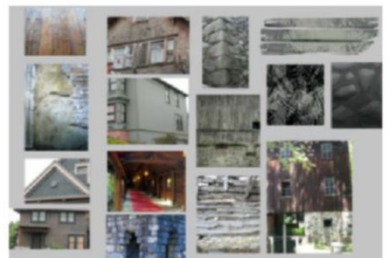
Yes and no. For me as a player, that's just not what I think games do well. The part that's interesting to me is: what does it feel like to be a giant tentacle? Or what does it feel like to be on a swing? And so from the early days, that's where we spent all of our energy, just making these interactive prototypes, and the story didn't come in until pretty late in development.

Unusually, you can spoil the reveal of Edith's pregnancy by looking down.

I'm generally not a fan of bodies in first-person games, particularly feet. But our tech artist Chelsea Hash held onto this dream of being able to show [the protagonist's] body for so long, and then it was as easy to show it as not. I do really like that it's something players can discover on their own. Some players are really blown away by it, and some like Neil Druckmann [who is credited as a playtester] – he just looked down, I think it was in the kitchen, and he said, 'Oh, I'm pregnant'. And then he moved on [laughs].

stories before players have forgotten about them. I mean, I just started *Metal Gear Solid V* and I'm maybe three hours in, and I've already completely [forgotten] what was going on in the hospital at the beginning of the game and who those characters were. And I'm sure I'll be asked to care about them later, but I won't. It's nice to have something that's about 20-30 minutes long where you can still remember who everyone is and not have to hit people over the head with it. ■





1 Concepts for interiors of the Finch mansion. The hire of lead artist Brandon Martynowicz was, Dallas says, a turning point when it came to building the bedrooms in particular. "He had this almost military mindset of, 'OK, we've got 200 props we need to make for this bedroom, let's break it down, let's assign all these tasks, and let's get it done!'" Dallas recalls. Meanwhile, lead designer Chris Bell watched "a ton of playtests" to gauge potential sticking points and ensure players could make smooth progress through the Finch house.

2 Exterior concepts. Dallas: "We wanted to begin with a somewhat standard two-storey craftsman house that over the years, with the accretion of details and many different hands, becomes something that looks more organic, and as a result a little more threatening. So you have this contrast of things that are familiar, but raised to grotesque proportions"

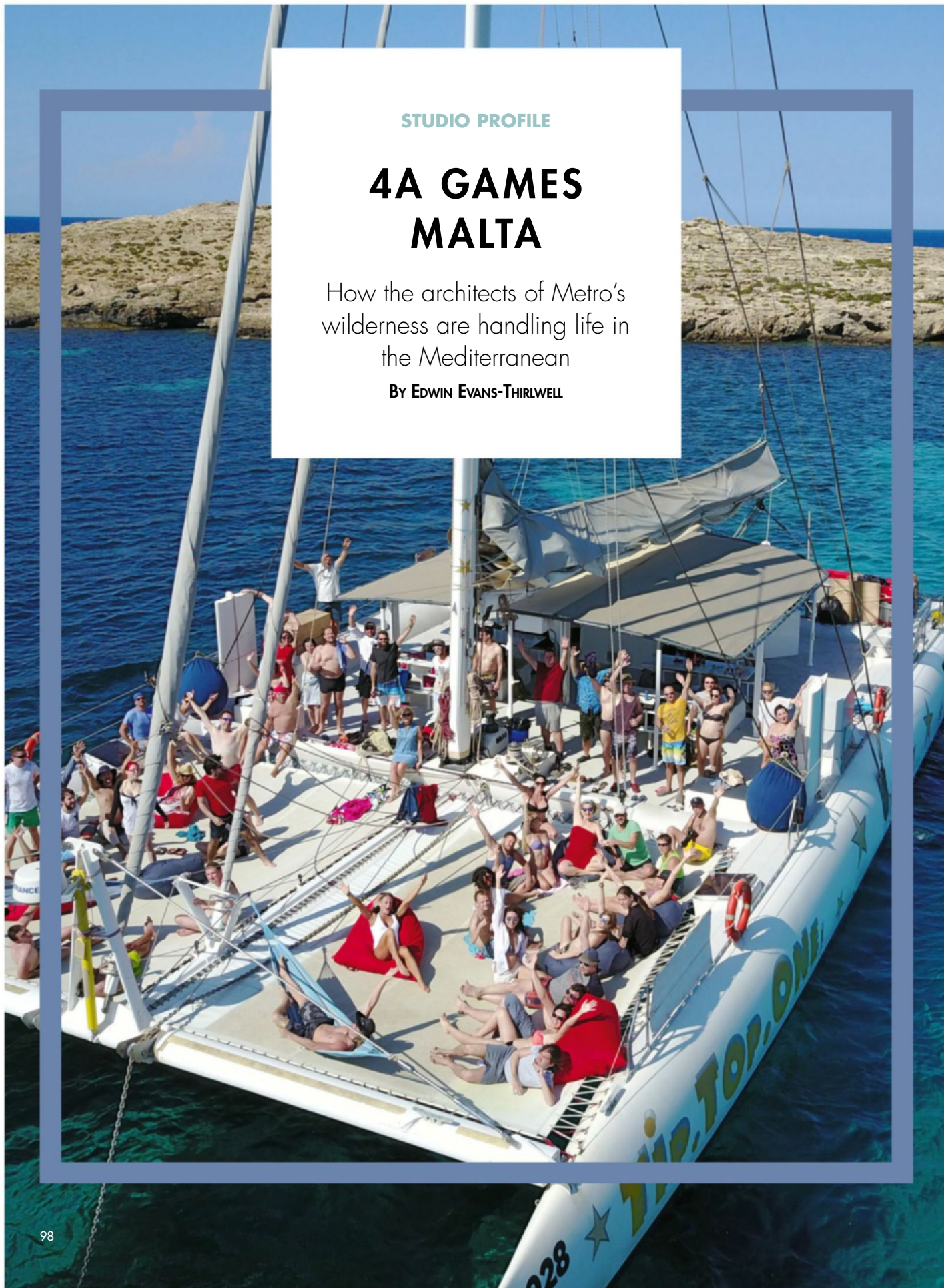


STUDIO PROFILE

4A GAMES MALTA

How the architects of Metro's
wilderness are handling life in
the Mediterranean

By EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL



Rising out of the ocean between Sicily and North Africa, the island chain of Malta has seen generations of settlers, traders and invaders come and go, its architecture a confusion of styles from across two continents. Take a stroll along the beaches of Sliema, one of its oldest towns, and you'll spy open-air Roman baths spread out near fortifications constructed by the French Knights of St John, shadowed by blocks of holiday apartments. Inland, you'll find terraces and art-nouveau houses erected during the island's spell as a British colony. You may also stumble upon the headquarters of 4A Games, the latest addition to Malta's cultural mosaic, which relocated to Sliema in 2014 following a revolution in the developer's native Ukraine.

Much of the revolution – which led to a full-blown civil war in Ukraine's easternmost provinces – unfolded just down the road from 4A's original premises in Kiev; according to Deep Silver global brand manager Huw Beynon, team members would take part in anti-government protests after work, before the bullets began to fly. 4A's California-born CEO **Dean Sharpe** insists, however, that the decision to move, in itself, had nothing to do with avoiding the violence. "Certainly, that may have affected the timing, but it was always part of the plan. Just in general, try moving a company some time! You're talking about families, kids, school, trying to find apartments for people, visas, residency permits – it's a really complicated process. So it wasn't like, 'Hey, war broke out. Let's bail.'"

Life in Ukraine had its challenges before the crisis, in any case – the country is one of the most corrupt in Europe and suffers from an ongoing healthcare crisis. 4A's hope in expanding to Malta was to attract partners put off by the thought of doing business in its homeland. For all that, around 80 staff still work at the Ukrainian studio, and 4A remains a Ukrainian developer in its heart of hearts. The company's new headquarters – a copiously air-conditioned open-plan studio with its own recording facilities and parasol-dotted veranda – runs a 24/7 live link to the original office, allowing for an informal working relationship between teams hundreds of miles apart. There are also dedicated phone booths for calls home, and on the veranda, a creeper vine sprouted in Ukraine and carried to the island in a paper bag.

4A's expansion has certainly borne fruit. It now has two announced games in production



Executive producer Jonathan Bloch (left) joined 4A from Turtle Rock; Yehven Fedorets is a designer on Metro Exodus

between Ukraine and Malta, the predictably sumptuous *Metro Exodus* and wintry Oculus Touch shooter *Arktika 1*. But relocating to Malta has created new challenges, too, as company executives strive to foster collaboration between far-flung teams while allowing for a certain amount of productive disagreement. "Most of the original 4A guys have worked together their entire lives, their entire professional careers,"

"FOR PROBABLY 60 TO 75 PER CENT OF THE ENTIRE COMPANY, THIS IS THE ONLY JOB THEY'VE EVER HAD"

Sharpe says. "For probably 60 to 75 per cent of the entire company, this is the only job they've ever had. They're more like family than co-workers. So a big part of the reason we needed to make another studio was that we needed a place where other people could come in. And Ukraine was not that place."

Sharpe speaks from personal experience, having moved to Ukraine in 2005 while employed by now-defunct THQ to serve as executive producer on *Metro's* spiritual predecessor, *STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl*. "I might as well have been a leper back in those days," he says. "It was really bad. My first days at GSC Game World they put me in this – I'm not exaggerating – 300 square-foot room, all painted white, a single desk, and that's it. By myself, sitting in this room! I was an outsider coming into their very family-oriented nucleus, and they didn't want any part of it. I was the person in control of the purse strings, so they had to put up with me to some extent, but it certainly didn't mean they had to be nice. Ukrainians are



4A GAMES
MALTA

Founded 2014
Employees 150
Key staff Dean Sharpe (chief executive officer), Andrew Prokhorov (creative director and co-founder), Oles Shishkovstov (chief technical officer)
URL www.4a-games.com.mt
Selected softography
Metro 2033, *Metro: Last Light*
Current projects *Arktika 1*, *Metro Exodus*

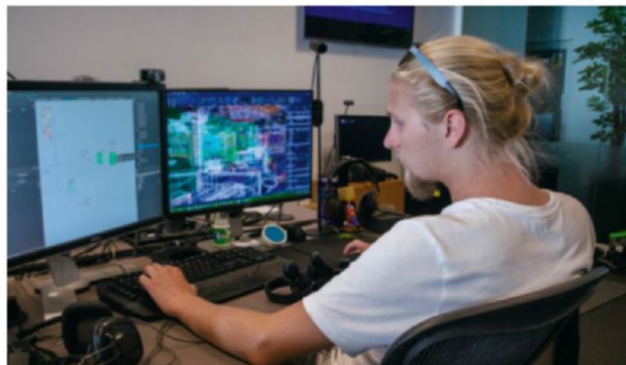
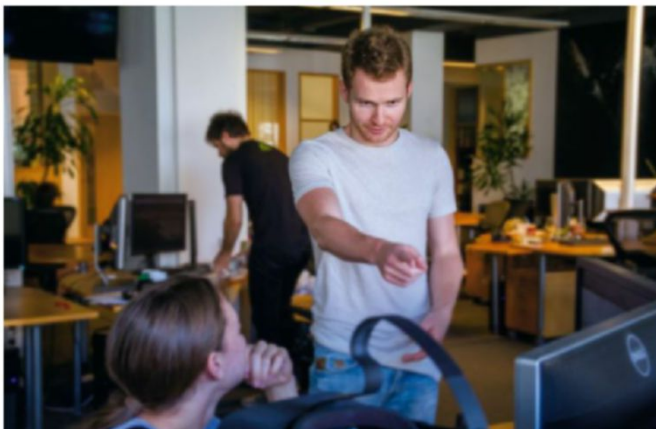
not welcoming people, initially – they're ridiculously open once you break through that wall, but at first they're like, 'Stay out, we don't want anything new.'"

Designer **Yehven Fedorets** certainly seems happy about the studio's transformation. "Right now I'm working with people from Italy, Malta, Mexico, France, the United States, and it's very, very interesting," he says. **Jonathan Bloch** – a Turtle Rock alumnus who joined 4A Malta in 2015 – is equally enthusiastic, if cautious of making grand claims on behalf of non-Ukrainian team members. "I wouldn't say that everyone in the company before [the move] thought the same,

but there's definitely been a fresh set of eyes, a fresh set of brains that have come in to stir up the pot," he says. It's fortunate that 4A's original and new employees enjoy working together, because there's a significant degree of crossover between sites and projects. *Arktika 1* and *Metro Exodus* are being developed by the Ukraine and Malta offices in parallel – Fedorets and Bloch serve as lead game designer and executive producer respectively on both titles – with all development disciplines represented in each office.

This is tacitly sold to us as a flexible structure that empowers individuals to take the initiative, but it also suggests a developer that is still a little in flux, still thrashing out the balance of power between the old guard and the greenhorns. "We do have people that are mostly assigned to one project or another," Bloch continues, "but at the same time, especially since we're sharing the same engine across all of our products, the programmer that wrote that feature we used on a couple of different products, maybe he's got to work on this project for one week and on that ▶

STUDIO PROFILE



4A's Malta office includes a secret gaming room, its hidden door sitting flush with the wall, plus a large kitchen area with table football and an open-air BBQ

project for the next. We share the resources around. We do have to have most of the *Arktika* team here, but there are guys in the Kiev office who are working on it as well." Sharpe, meanwhile, won't be drawn on each project's precise headcount. "It's not so easy to say there's X number of people working on anything; it really depends where we're at with things. Obviously I can't give away too much without revealing other projects, but it really depends on workload."

Fedorets describes 4A as a site for open dialogue, regardless of rank, where anyone from any part of the company can offer feedback on any game feature. "We need to hear everyone. Everyone has such a different reaction. There's no rule that says this game's process is better than that game's. Unless this game isn't performing the same – then, maybe, there's something wrong." The process is, however, complicated by the fact that, according to Sharpe, "roughly half the company barely has conversational English. I can speak Russian, but I couldn't have a meaningful conversation in Russian even though I understand most of what's being said."

4A's chiefs are working to overcome any lingering cases of culture shock with the usual team-bonding activities, including catamaran excursions and monthly office parties. But culture clashes are in some ways all part of the plan, in as much as they're an opportunity to break with or revise some of 4A's more dyed-in-the-wool traditions. One bone of contention has been where to draw the line on realism and visual fidelity, a hallmark of the studio's output which dates back to its founders' days at GSC. "You can't fault them for that, but it's interesting," Sharpe says. "I was just talking to one of our

artists last night at the movie theatre. He's working on an asset for us for something, and he's like, 'You guys are killing me. They wanted it to be so perfect, and it's a button! That never gets pressed!' They told him, 'No, it's not the right size,' and he says: 'It's never going to be pressed!'"

A longer-term challenge for 4A is that while Malta is an attractive location ("You don't need a jacket," Sharpe says. "One guy refused to bring pants with him") the island's size and relative isolation means there isn't much local talent to call on. "Other than us, there's a couple of other studios here, Exient and PlayMagic, but they're

think back to the first schools, videogame schools, like DigiPen back in the day, it took them 10 to 15 years before they got their stuff together," Sharpe explains. "It takes time to build that expertise. Even if you had a good curriculum – and if it was me, I'd go to one of those other schools, get their curriculum, and then pay somebody a shitload of money to teach it – even then, you're going to have to wait five, 10 years before you actually expect to get [any good hires] out of it." All that notwithstanding, 4A will continue to recruit Maltese developers "just in the hopes that we get things happening, and also to

"BECAUSE WE'RE OUT ON AN ISLAND, WE KIND OF FEEL THAT WE ALL FAIL OR SUCCEED TOGETHER"

small groups doing handheld stuff. Nobody else is doing triple-A games in Malta." 4A is looking to rectify this, however, working with local academic institutions like the Malta College Of Arts, Science And Technology. "We've actually hired one person who's gone through a curriculum that I helped create. I reached out to Malta Enterprise, the organisation here that helps bring companies in, and through them spoke to the universities, like MCAST. I also talked with Exient and PlayMagic, and Codemasters had a studio here up until about a year ago. Jim Brown, their studio head, was brilliant at working with universities, pulling everybody together. Because we're out on an island, we kind of feel that we all fail or succeed together."

The shortage of local developers also means there's a shortage of qualified teachers. "If you

be a good partner, which I think is important anywhere you're based. You have to try."

As *Metro Exodus* begins, series protagonist Artyom has finally escaped the tunnels of Moscow and set out across the wastes in search of a new home. It would be facile to label this a metaphor for 4A's own international journey, but there is something revealing about the game's continuing use of a railroad as the backbone of its campaign, for all the more open feel of its environments. It's a premise that speaks to how 4A has both lost and found itself in Malta, preserving links to the past even as it absorbs new perspectives and approaches. "The guys that we have, the core, are some of the best people in the industry," Sharpe tells us. "But you have got to continually bring in new blood, and not just from one pool." ■



- 1 *Arktika 1* introduces slick sci-fi weapons in place of 4A's usual rusty, makeshift firearms.
- 2 *Metro: Last Light* is among the few sequels to treat the original's darker optional ending as canon.
- 3 4A collaborated on each *Metro* game's plot with original *Metro* novelist Dmitry Glukhovsky.
- 4 Each *Metro* title has blended in elements of pure simulation, such as Artyom's fragile gas mask



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Overwatch PS4

Like the world's least appetising doughnut, *Overwatch's* Competitive mode continues to leak a limitless ooze of poison and salt. Forget rank climbing and rage-quitting teammates: Arcade is where it's at nowadays. We find far more joy in the continuously updated mini-modes, whether it's the well-iterated, tightly constructed quickfire rounds of 3v3 or lobbing (normally useless) D.Va nukes into a horrified opposition during a Low Gravity match. Jammy stuff indeed.

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild Switch

Just when we thought we'd got out, the first of two planned DLC expansions arrives, and we're sucked back in to Nintendo's peerless adventure. We're eased back in by the Hero's Path feature, which plots a line on the map tracking 200 hours of past footsteps; then we're put firmly in our place by the nails-hard, 100-floor combat challenge Trial Of The Sword. We'll leave Master Mode for a bit, if that's OK.

Wolfenstein: The New Order PS4

Our wheelchair-bound introduction to sequel *The New Colossus* had us pinning for a well-written and cleverly designed singleplayer FPS; since those are few and far between in these online-obsessed days, we decided to return to MachineGames' 2014 original. It's aged wonderfully well, thankfully. A lengthy session leaves us thoroughly satisfied, but on the brink of carpal tunnel syndrome, already looking forward to a new feature in the sequel: automated ammo pick-up. We haven't mashed a face button like that since our *Track & Field* days.



Explore the iPad edition of *Edge* for extra Play content

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Old souls

E3 may have offered us a teasing glimpse of the future of interactive entertainment, but this month's Play crop offers a much more nostalgic view of things. Summer is a quiet time for games; typically it's an ideal time for slightly left-of-centre fare to stand out. Yet one look at the list of new releases this month might have you wondering exactly which year we're in.

In *Ever Oasis* (p114), we have a cutesy, super-deformed Japanese RPG directed by Koichi Ishii, an industry veteran best known as the director of SNES classic *Secret Of Mana*. Things have moved on since then, certainly, but Ishii's signature runs right through *Ever Oasis*, both for better and worse.

Meanwhile, one look at *Valkyria Revolution* (p108) and you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd slipped into an alternate timeline where Sega never turned its back on the concept of risk after one lukewarm set of fiscal results too many. *Final*

Fantasy XIV: Stormblood (p112), meanwhile, calls back to a time before the WOW-inspired MMO loot grind lost its lustre. And, heavens above, what's that on p119? A new *Micro Machines*? Are you sure it's still 2017?

While none of the above are entirely without charm, they are all designed to appeal to a certain type of player, grey about the temples and pining for better bygone times. And the kind smile of nostalgia can excuse all kinds of ills: *Revolution's* awful story; *Stormblood's* hackneyed questing; *Micro Machines'* weirdly corporate veneer. Yet you don't need to be ancient to appreciate *Nex Machina* (p104). Its inspirations may be dated, and obvious, but this lightning-paced, spectacular homage to *Robotron* – made in partnership with that game's creator Eugene Jarvis – would be essential in any era. If only we still had our 1980s reflexes.



Nex Machina

Let's call it choreographed chaos. Sure, *Nex Machina's* enemies fall in familiar patterns, but things never quite seem to pan out the same way twice. Perhaps, we may have to concede, that's just the way we're playing it — desperately searching for space wherever we can find it, frantically firing off our sub-weapon, fretting rather less about optimal paths than the simple act of staying alive. Not that doing so is ever simple in this fiercely absorbing twin-stick shooter, you understand, but it's all relative in a game as demanding, as ceaselessly combative, as this.

A partnership between Housemarque and Eugene Jarvis always felt like a natural progression for a studio that has often seemed to be collaborating with this pioneering designer without his prior knowledge. Indeed, a more mischievous observer might wonder if Housemarque didn't engineer a role on *Nex Machina* for Jarvis so that he might consult on the game rather than with his lawyer, given the similarities with his past work. Beyond the obvious Jarvis influence on games like *Resogun* — a modern-day *Defender* in all but name — the two parties clearly share similar ideas when it comes to challenge. Though it's unclear just how far his role extended, the results suggest Jarvis, accustomed as he was to relieving unwitting punters of their quarters in his arcade heyday, has lost little of that flinty edge. Housemarque is working with his company, Raw Thrills, to produce a *Nex Machina* arcade cabinet, which is surely its natural home; still, PS4 or PC will more than suffice for now.

This is, at heart, a straightforward, single-minded game. The setup is as meat-and-potatoes as they come: the machines are trying to kill us, and it's humanity's job to fight back. But though you might not see it at first, *Nex Machina* steadily becomes a more layered, complex experience the more you play. For your first few tries — and the next few, too — you're focusing almost exclusively on survival. You'll be aware that part of your job is to save the humans wandering around each level, but you'll also be happy to let them be harvested if a rescue attempt means putting yourself in harm's way. Though given the way these oafish survivors blunder around, constantly getting themselves in dreadful trouble, the machines surely can't want them for their brains.

As with any good twin-stick shooter, it's all about crowd control. And what crowds. The smaller machines swarm like insects, circular drop points alerting you to their imminent arrival so you can move out of the way — not that there's much space to move to. Alongside them, bulky monstrosities make a beeline for the humans, while others are akin to static WMDs. Later variants include robot wheels that accelerate toward you before exploding, machines wielding stretchy electric whips, tanks firing payloads that wouldn't

Developer Housemarque
Publisher Housemarque
Format PC, PS4 (both tested)
Release Out now

Enemies arrive in formation, but your presence is a disruptive influence to their plans



look out of place in a Cave shooter, and a hulking giant who keeps crawling toward you even after you've blasted his lower torso into a thick mist of voxels, per the house style.

Despite those cascading cubes and the studio's fondness for lurid pyrotechnics, the action is easy to parse, even at such an unrelenting tempo. Housemarque's trick is to paint its environments in relatively muted hues, and then give the vital elements a bright outline to ensure they stand out. Power-ups get a cyan glow, while it's green for the humans, an ominous red for enemies, and a shocking pink for projectiles. Strips of chevron guide you towards the remaining survivors if they're beyond the fringes of the screen, while laser-shooting enemies telegraph their attacks with a thin aiming line before they fire. Secrets are naturally presented less ostentatiously, but over time you'll acclimatise to the telltale visual clues — though you might need an explosive sub-weapon to access a few of the hidden exits and survivors.

Finding these is key to climbing the leaderboards; likewise, killing the three special types of machine within each world. Beacons are usually tucked away behind an obstruction or a seemingly ordinary piece of scenery. The scuttling Disruptors race away from you as soon as a new stage begins, and must be taken out before they can make their escape. And then there are the Visitors, centipede-like robots that seem to be merely passing through before disappearing into a portal: before they do, you'll need to destroy every segment of their bodies.

That's a lot to think about in a game that's keen to put you on the back foot and keep you there, and there's more. Those bumbling humans, you see, are more crucial than they may seem. Saving them is a good deed that doesn't go unrewarded, but how — or rather, when — you rescue them is more vital still. For each one you successfully recover, a combo meter will start to deplete; reach another before it drains entirely and your multiplier will build. As such, racing to them as quickly as possible is often the wrong tactic, especially when you've still got more than a dozen enemies to kill before you can warp to the next stage. By the same token, you can't leave them too long, so you'll either need to grab them just before they become machine fodder, or else take out the enemy that presents their greatest threat.

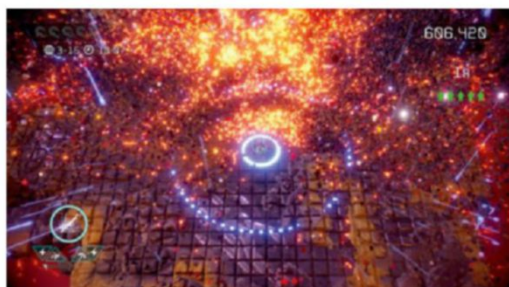
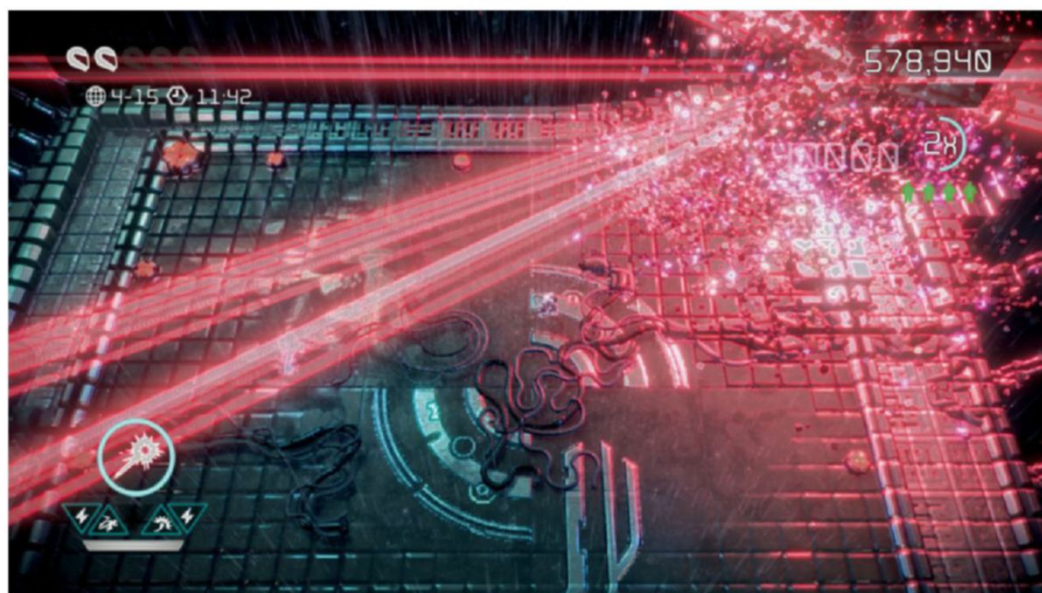
Which, of course, might not be the same one as in your previous game. Enemies arrive in formation, but your presence is a disruptive influence to their plans. As much as pattern-learning helps, you're an unpredictable variable in the equation, and as such you'll still need to think on your feet, adapting and reacting to dangers you might well have avoided on



ABOVE This marvellous light show marks the end of a stage, and a last shot at improving your high score – time a dash to coincide with your avatar boosting away and you'll get a small bonus.

LEFT The boss battles aren't exactly easy, but in a game as relentless as this they almost represent a breather, since you can focus on one target rather than choosing between several threats.

BELOW You'll have to be sharp-eyed to spot a few of the secret areas and hidden beacons, though you'll no doubt discover a few by happy accident – whether by triggering a smart bomb to get out of a tight spot, or blasting wildly to mow down a wave of grunts



ABOVE Housemarque only dials up the effects in *Nex Machina* when you don't really need to see what's going on. The spectacular explosion of a vanquished boss is most definitely a worthy payoff for your efforts





an earlier run. A right-trigger dash gets you out of a lot of sticky spots, and can be combined with a power-up for a short-range explosion. Inevitably, the best players use this both to kill enemies efficiently and as an opportunity to showboat. Viewing a replay of anyone near the top of the high-score tables is like watching an elaborate dance: experts can somehow find space where there is none, casually dashing one way while firing another, making what's supposed to be an ordeal seem like a simple tidying-up job. At this level, it's not a game where you're always moving back and around, corralling enemies as if rounding up herds of truculent robot sheep; rather, it's a game where you stare into death's gaping maw, dash toward it and then blow it up with a smart bomb. Or, if you're really showing off, a sword.

It's quite the spectacle even when you're making a hash of things. Die and the screen will fill with bright, criss-crossing purple lines, like straws in a neon Kerplunk set. Those pinks, blues and greens glow all the brighter against a night-time backdrop of rain-lashed skyscrapers. And when you move between stages, your avatar will draw in energy and boost up, around and down, the camera swooping and gliding to track them, sometimes twisting as you find yourself fighting on the flipside of the previous level. Just be sure not to coo over those transitions too much; these are the rare moments you're afforded time to draw breath. It doesn't sound bad either: atop a soundtrack of driving synths you'll find cheerful chimes, thudding explosions and, best of all, Housemarque's regular announcer, who narrates all key interactions with serene authority. "Human lost" is said with a hint of quiet disapproval, while "rocket launcher" sounds ever-



ROBOTRON 2017

If the prospect of another hour-long run through Arcade mode seems too daunting, you can tackle individual worlds you've previously reached, or aim for a high score on Arena mode, which is initially set to Experienced difficulty. On each run you'll earn tokens which can be used to unlock variants where the action moves faster, or where you're set a time limit of four minutes to amass a high score; another sees your tally increase only while your human bonus is intact. Hit the challenging bronze, silver and gold medal targets and you'll earn 25, 50 and 100 tokens respectively. There are various accomplishments for the truly dedicated player: killing 10 enemies with a single sword swipe, for example, or delivering the finishing blow to a boss with a dash explosion.

Die, and you'll drop your most recent power-up, though while the rest of the level resets, it'll remain where you fell, giving you the chance to collect it again – unless, of course, you die again before you reach it

so-slightly smug – as it well should, since it's probably the pick of the sub-weapons.

Nex Machina's six worlds, each comprising 15 levels and climaxing with a boss fight, can be finished in around an hour, give or take. The challenge obviously steepens as you take a step up to Experienced, with enemy movement accelerating and your infinite continues reduced to a paltry 99, but the game remains the same. An Arena mode, meanwhile, requires multiple playthroughs to unlock alternative variations. But a grind doesn't feel like a grind when you're in the zone, and the brevity of a single campaign only makes another run all the more likely. Some will bemoan the lack of extras, but they're not needed. To accuse it of lacking content is to miss the point: playing *Nex Machina* is its own reward.

There are occasions where it perhaps lacks a little of the clarity of its inspirations; moments where, for example, you get caught on a chunk of scenery you couldn't reasonably have spotted when there's *this* much going on at any given time. And, if we're being especially picky, it could stand to make it more obvious when your sub-weapon and dash are charged – though given enough practice you'll instinctively know. After a couple of disappointments, then, Housemarque seems re-energised by Jarvis, and the result is the Finns' best game to date. We'll need a little longer with it before we can say the same for Jarvis, but the fact we're even considering its place among *Smash TV*, *Robotron* and *Defender* in the pantheon of classic arcade shooters should tell you all you need to know.

Post Script

Harry Krueger, game director, Housemarque

After heading up the programming team on the much-loved PS4 launch title *Resogun*, **Harry Krueger** moved into the director's chair on *Nex Machina*. Two years of hard work later, he's now taking a short break. Here, he discusses his chemistry with Eugene Jarvis, balancing spectacle with readability, and the art of designing with scissors.

How did Eugene Jarvis get involved in *Nex Machina*?

Housemarque's co-founders, Harri [Tikkanen] and Ilari [Kuittinen] were at DICE, and they basically thought, 'Why not approach Eugene and ask the guy to work with us?' I mean, it's clear we've been inspired by his work, and we're pretty like-minded when it comes to game design. One thing led to another and Eugene jumped on board — especially once he got a chance to play *Resogun*. I couldn't believe it was happening. We started with some calls, and then went and met Eugene in Chicago. The two of us had this instant chemistry — we hit it off and started talking about what really made those great old arcade games tick, and [discussing] how to take that formula and apply it to a modern game.

Did you have an idea of what *Nex Machina* was before you approached him?

Obviously we worked on *Resogun* before this, and that was inspired by *Defender*. And even though I really like *Defender*, I've always thought *Robotron* is the gold standard when it comes to arcade games. I've always wanted to make a modern reincarnation of that game, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to do it. Getting Eugene on board was just another planet that happened to align at that moment, and solidified that this was absolutely what we needed to do for our next project. To be honest, we didn't start out with any grand ideas: as a first step, we wanted to recreate the magic of the original, which is no simple feat in itself. We took the *Resogun* engine, and started building some prototypes. Within a few weeks we had something that resembled the feeling of confinement and intensity that the original *Robotron* offered. After that, it was just a matter of iteration to get to where we are now.

The human combo makes a huge difference to score-chasing. At what stage was that introduced?

Over more or less two years of development, we iterated a lot. Sometimes you try some ideas and you see potential in them but you don't take them that far, and they're just left in the codebase waiting to be refined at some point. The human combo was one of those things — I remember hacking it in as a test early on, but at the time we were also trying out a lot of other [ideas] for the scoring system and we weren't certain what we



"The primary goal wasn't to make the game hard, it was to make the game intense"



wanted to go with. Sometimes having a primitive version of a feature isn't enough to fully evaluate it — so it didn't feel like much, but after we added the proper timing, the progress bar, the particle effects, the ring closing around the humans, then it started feeling like a part of the game. And then it started affecting the way that you played the game, which completely transformed the experience of a high-skill run.

Even by Housemarque standards, this isn't an easy game. Were you consciously trying to replicate the challenge of those classic arcade games?

I personally think you can't really have a sense of accomplishment without a challenge to overcome. If something is just handed to you, it doesn't have the same value as when you have to earn it. It wasn't the driving force — we didn't have this endgame of, 'OK, let's make this game really hard and ship it and let's see what happens!'. The difficulty needed to be nuanced and balanced; the primary goal wasn't to make the game hard, it was to make the game intense, even from the get-go. So my instructions to the level designer were to treat World 1 as if it's World 2: don't try to ease the player into anything, don't have any tutorials or long cinematic sequences, and just focus 100 per cent on replayability. We wanted people playing the game to instantly feel that sense of confinement; that you can run, but you can't hide.

To us, the game feels very lean and focused; others would say that it's short. Does that concern you?

A common trend I've experienced is that you always have this 'ambition' phase of a project, when you start dreaming big and thinking about massive worlds and RPG elements and vehicles you can drive around. You're just brainstorming, but before you know it you have a pile of potential ideas for the game. And then it's a process of taking all that and distilling it down to the things that are absolutely necessary for the game to be good. I knew from the very first week of development that we would have six worlds. But at first we tried to make the game basically three times as big as it is now. At a certain point we even had manual transitions, so you'd have to walk to the exit to proceed to the next stage. Of course, that introduced many seconds of downtime, which was unacceptable (laughs). We wanted to deliver an experience that was intense and engaging from the start, and it simply felt exhausting to have a game that long. More is not always better, so we started cutting away and refining — design with scissors, so to speak. And that's what we ended up with, and I'm happy with the length of the game, because once again we've designed everything for replayability. ■

Valkyria Revolution

There's nothing wrong with wanting to reinvent a beloved series. The history of games is studded with spin-offs and revamps that worked, in many cases changing things for the better. But even the well-oiled propaganda machine at the heart of this ponderous war story would struggle to put a positive spin on this particular transformation. *Valkyria Revolution* doesn't deserve criticism for attempting to diverge from its formula, for throwing out the smart tactical combat of its predecessors, or for revising the original's distinctive pen-and-wash style. It's not a disappointment because it's different, but because the changes it makes are almost exclusively for the worse.

The story is seemingly founded upon a total misunderstanding of what made the first game such a cult favourite, believing that a surfeit of backstory and exposition makes for engaging narrative. It squanders a promising setup which occasionally threatens to become more intriguing, as the kingdom of Jutland enters into conflict with the vast and powerful Ruzi empire, in a so-called Liberation War engineered by a coterie of five young people who have manoeuvred their way into positions of influence. This is interspersed with a discussion, 100 years on, between two academics. As a framing device, this soon proves troublesome, not only since it reveals the outcome of the war and the fate of several key characters, but also because it means events are often explained twice over.

That might be less of a problem if the pace was snappier. But if *Chronicles*' cutscenes could have used a trim, *Revolution*'s examination of war makes Tolstoy look like a novella writer. Scenes of almost farcical length follow one another, bookended – and sometimes interrupted – by waits so frequent that the words 'Now Loading' in the bottom-right of the screen come to feel like the game's unofficial logo. The box blurb likens these story sequences to 'moving paintings', which is generous in the extreme. The gouache-on-canvas art style feels less an aesthetic choice so much as an opportunity to paper over some obvious visual cracks. And the scenes themselves are so static and sparsely animated that at times you'll struggle to work out who's talking during group discussions, especially since the speaker often has their back to the camera.

Budgetary constraints can only partly account for such lifelessness. Limp direction and dull performances don't help, but the present-day sequences are tedious back-and-forth where key developments are restated. Elsewhere, in the pokey meeting place of the so-called Five Traitors, this quintet of schemers simply stands around a table explaining the plot in interminable detail. The whole thing is slathered in JRPG cliché, epitomised by protagonist Amleth, a sullen orphan with a parodically oversized sword and an outfit that seems to have more belts in every successive cutscene.

Developer Media Vision
Publisher Deep Silver
Format PS4 (tested), Vita, Xbox One
Release Out now

The words 'Now Loading' in the bottom-right of the screen come to feel like the game's unofficial logo



BORE WAR

Revolution's insipid storytelling is all the more frustrating for those early hints that it might have something to say about the politics of war. Along with Amleth on the front line, the Five Traitors include a politician, a newspaper columnist, a spy and an arms manufacturer. It teases a nuanced examination of the manipulation of information, and sets up a potentially fascinating moral conflict in the idea that Jutland is being coerced into a needless war for the sake of personal revenge. Yet it's always clear which side the developer is on. The Ruzi empire are little more than pantomime villains, with a cartoonishly evil ruler whose actions have already economically crippled Jutland, ensuring the nation has little alternative but to take arms and fight. Any human consequences of the conflict, meanwhile, are either ignored or hurriedly glossed over.

Eventually, control will be handed back to you, usually when there's a new country to liberate – at which point your party of four steps onto the battlefield and any faint hope that the action might compensate for the story's flaws quickly evaporates. It's an awkward hodgepodge, combining realtime combat with Active Time elements and the option to pause to launch special attacks or command friendly units. You can guard and roll at the push of a button, but the brief cooldown between attacks, along with the canned multi-hit animation that plays out when you tap X, means it's wholly unsatisfying as an action game, like a *Musou* title with a sluggish, halting rhythm.

Yet its strategic side doesn't really work either. If you want to launch a grenade or a volley of machine-gun fire, you'll have to pause and aim, the delay essentially letting you get in a free shot, since opponents will remain frozen in time. But though grenades are handy for dealing with a group of grunts with minimal fuss, and guns for lone enemies in watchtowers, they're feeble against larger adversaries, so you'll end up relying on your group's mana-infused weapon skills. Here, it's simply a matter of discovering a unit's elemental weakness and exploiting it, switching control to whichever party member can deal the most damage in the quickest time. Or, you can simply wade in with your most powerful fighter and mash the attack button, ducking out just before a telegraphed area attack is triggered, and repeating until it finally drops.

Despite a range of ways to apparently influence your teammates' battle roles, the suicidally dumb AI will constantly blunder into danger. Half-hearted cover and stealth systems are rendered useless by your allies' gormless keenness to waltz into open ground. Giving them specific commands during combat is long-winded and entirely unnecessary when you can just assume direct control, though the soldier from whom you switched will invariably opt to stand immediately adjacent to the enemy as it winds up for its most powerful attack. Since reviving a teammate is as simple as trotting over to where they fell and pressing a button, the game's most fearsome antagonists don't so much take thought to beat as time, as you joylessly chip away at their annoyingly long health bars.

Meanwhile, with a structure that demands you revisit earlier levels to push back the Ruzi forces, your party will gain experience that all but negates the need to fuss over the incremental boosts from gear and weapon upgrades. It's yet another poorly thought-out system in a game with plenty of ideas but no clue of how to make them coalesce. The result is a tiresome slog that proves the first casualty of war is not innocence, but brevity. *Valkyria Devolution* might have been a more honest title.

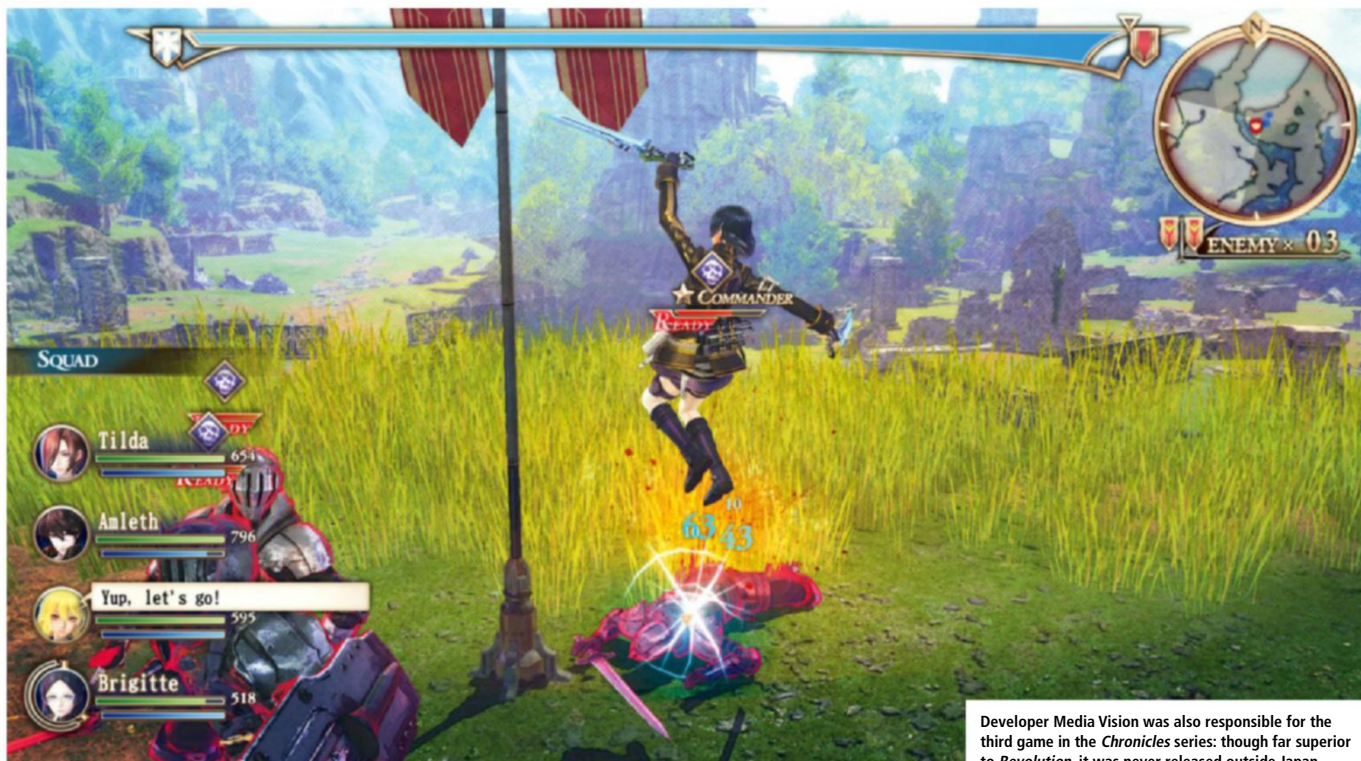
RIGHT Shocking or freezing these fast-moving bipedal tanks is a predictably effective tactic, letting the group hack away without fear of retaliation. For larger mechs you'll need to first target their legs to keep them stationary for a while, as you turn your focus to the crystals that power their weapons.

MAIN The central city hub is comfortably the game's most attractive space, and it develops as the war progresses, with more merchants arriving to set up shop.

BOTTOM In some missions you'll take two squads into battle, switching groups when one has completed a key objective. As such, it's wise not to use the same team members for every mission – some units will be left underpowered



ABOVE The anime-styled character models are far less appealing than those in earlier games – just wait until you see the ludicrously proportioned Brunhilde – while stilted animation makes the cutscenes a tough watch



Developer Media Vision was also responsible for the third game in the *Chronicles* series: though far superior to *Revolution*, it was never released outside Japan

Post Script

Why Valkyria Revolution is a disappointing speedbump on Sega's road to recovery

Sega was dead, or so they said. Back in 2012, with financial pressures forcing it out of publishing in continental Europe, the company's execs spoke ominously of 'strategic realignment' and 'a refocusing on digital'. To all extents and purposes, it seemed beyond a handful of proven successes – *Aliens*, *Total War*, *Football Manager* and *Sonic* – the Sega we all knew and loved was no more.

Five years on, and things are looking a good deal rosier for the publisher, thanks to a number of smart licensing deals, creative partnerships and revivals of the games with which it made its name in the first place. Last year, it acquired *Endless Space* developer Amplitude Studios; in May, the sequel to the popular 4X strategy sequel launched to a warm reception. *Halo Wars 2* may have been a Microsoft production, but it was certainly a profile-booster for Sega subsidiary Creative Assembly, while the same studio's link-up with the *Warhammer* brand has already borne fruit. *Total War: Warhammer* was a big success last year; a quick-fire sequel is due in September.

Meanwhile, in Deep Silver it has found a publishing partner willing to bring its more esoteric, Japan-developed games to Europe. Though *Valkyria Revolution* isn't the game we all hoped it would be, it bodes well for future games in the series heading west – which had

previously looked unlikely when PSP title *Valkyria Chronicles 3* wasn't deemed worthy of localisation. And it would be hard to complain too loudly when 2017 has already yielded the excellent *Persona 5* (developed by the Sega-owned Atlus) and *Yakuza 0*. With *Kiwami*, a remake of the original *Yakuza*, launching in August, and the sixth mainline entry due to reach these shores early next year, that's three games in 12 months for a series whose western life appeared to be over until relatively recently.

While looking to safeguard its future, Sega has also discovered the value in delving into its past. The extraordinary success of its 2014 PC port of the original *Valkyria Chronicles* has since inspired the publisher to rework its other 360/PS3-era hits: over the last few months we've seen *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* arrive on Steam, both looking better and running smoother than ever. August, meanwhile, sees the release of *Sonic Mania*, a handsome throwback to the hedgehog's side-scrolling heyday, made by a team of long-term *Sonic* fans headed by Christian Whitehead, who ported the first two games to mobile platforms.

And talking of smartphones, there's Sega Forever, its new initiative to bring classic games to a new audience on iOS and Android.

Free to download, and supported by ads (but with the option to pay a one-off fee to remove them) they're not simply a nostalgic reminder of Sega at its creative peak, but a chance to reintroduce properties and potentially benefit from cross-promotional opportunities. Nintendo saw a significant boost to sales of the 3DS *Fire Emblem* games after the launch of mobile spin-off *Heroes*; likewise with *Super Mario Run*. It's hard to imagine Sega not having similar plans in store.

In a quiet way, then, Sega is starting to become a major player once more, and it's doing it without taking any serious risks – sharing the burden of responsibility with publishing partners, while getting results from relatively low-cost ports for its recent PC releases, and emulators for mobile. There's still work to be done: complaints about poor quality emulation on the *Forever* series suggest it needs to do more to live up to its promise of a renewed focus on quality. But Sega has made significant progress by doing exactly what it said it would, proving that we needn't have been quite so worried about those seemingly doom-laden promises. In other words, *Valkyria Revolution* is hopefully nothing more than a fleeting dip on an upward trajectory for one of gaming's most enduring names. Now, let's have *Ghost Squad VR*, hmm? ■



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Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood

The pantheon of *Final Fantasy* heroes is largely dominated by spiky-haired boys with piercing gazes and chilly demeanours. By contrast, *Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood*'s new heroine, Lyse, is like a warm summer breeze. She's affable and vibrant, and her struggle to liberate her homeland from the evil Garlean empire is fraught with tension and drama. *Stormblood* is more than just an expansion to *Final Fantasy XIV*. It's also among the finest *Final Fantasy* stories ever told.

Following the events of the previous expansion, *Heavensward*, *Stormblood* sees you, the Warrior Of Light, and your cadre of fellow heroes off to free the provinces of Ala Mhigo and Doma from Garlean rule. Like much of *Final Fantasy XIV*, it's a throwback to the golden era of the series, a story about a grand adventure with good friends. While Lyse is easily the most likeable, the cast of *Final Fantasy XIV* has grown into an eclectic bunch, each with their own backstories and motivations.

Things aren't all sunshine and rainbows, however. *Stormblood*'s story is laced with optimism, making the tragedies that unfold throughout the 50-hour campaign more poignant. During the siege of Doma castle, an exciting victory turns bitter after a major villain exacts some last-minute revenge. Voice acting and writing, thankfully, have been much improved.

Of course, what is *Final Fantasy* without a good villain pulling all the strings? Again, *Stormblood* exceeds expectations by introducing Zenos Yae Galvus, the amoral and intimidating crown prince of the Garlean empire who lives only to chase the thrill of a good fight like a drug. Zenos might never command the adoration of classic villains like Sephiroth, but he's just as detestable. His calm, yet deranged, personality is oddly magnetic, and he steals the scene every chance he gets.

Whether you agree, however, will largely depend on if you still enjoy MMOs. *Stormblood* does little to change the genre's central formula of questing and grinding. Its main story is chopped up and gated off behind level requirements in a manner that is frequently frustrating. Where other MMOs such as *World Of Warcraft* have vastly improved the diversity of their quests over the years, *Stormblood*'s are, on their own, thoroughly boring. The main story arc hides this problem behind dramatic cutscenes and exciting boss battles, but the sidequests necessary to level up have no such crutch to lean on.

Worse yet, because *Final Fantasy XIV*'s story is one long arc that carries over from base game to its two expansions, you'll have to play through everything before reaching *Stormblood*. That's a 60-hour gig. Square Enix now sells items for real money that will let you skip the story, but it's a catch-22. Characters like Lyse are so endearing precisely because we've spent so much time adventuring with them; we've been watching her story evolve for almost four years now. If you're

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PC (tested), PS4
Release Out now

Characters like Lyse are endearing because we've spent so much time adventuring with them



APOCALYPSE THEN

Stormblood is set after the cataclysmic events that almost saw the world of Eorzea laid to waste. That apocalypse isn't just backstory, but an actual in-game event that players lived through. When *Final Fantasy XIV* first launched back in 2010, it was in such a disastrous state that Square Enix decided to rebuild it entirely. Weaving the game's troubled development together with its in-game narrative, players fought one last epic battle against the Garlean empire before the ancient god Bahamut broke free from his prison and ravaged the world. At the same time, *FFXIV* was closed for renovations. In 2013, it relaunched as *A Realm Reborn*, with sweeping changes to the core design and to critical acclaim. *FFXIV* was finally a game worthy of the series' considerable legacy.

coming to *Stormblood* as a new player and want to appreciate it in its best light, you must be prepared for a long, wearying trudge before stepping foot in Ala Mhigo.

Instead of fixing the genre's weaknesses, *Final Fantasy XIV* succeeds by buffing its strengths into a glorious shine — no other MMORPG can rival its often breathtaking audiovisual direction. The new, Asian-inspired continent of Othard is gorgeous. Simply exploring this new land is a delight, except for the new underwater zones which, while pretty, don't contain an awful lot that's worth doing.

The new group dungeons and their respective boss fights are inventive and a joy to play. In Kugane Castle, for example, the final boss is a hired samurai who only fights in exchange for money. Throughout the fight, his employer hurls piles of gold into the arena that players must collect before the samurai does, in order to weaken his attacks.

It is in primal boss battles, however, that *Stormblood* truly shines. Each has a singular standout moment or mechanic, such as having to complete a quick-time event to parry a blow from a sword-wielding demigod several hundred times your size. These fights are effective because *Stormblood* does a wonderful job of setting the stakes in its story, and then delivering on them with exhilarating battles that are both challenging and thematically rewarding.

For long-time players of *Final Fantasy XIV*, *Stormblood* also introduces sweeping changes to the combat, making it more streamlined and, barring a few early balancing issues with individual classes, a lot more enjoyable. One of the better changes is that you no longer have to level other classes to unlock skills necessary for your main class.

New job gauges further enhance the combat by providing flashy user-interface elements unique to each class. These are best utilised by *Stormblood*'s two new classes, the Red Mage and Samurai, which feel built from the ground up with the new system in mind. The Red Mage's gauge, for example, displays two mana bars that slowly fill in response to the types of spells they cast. The goal is to always keep those two bars relatively even, because the character's most devastating attacks spend those types of mana in equal measure. It's a delicate balancing act that is satisfying to master.

For those already playing *Final Fantasy XIV*, *Stormblood* is a beautiful, essential expansion. New players, however, will only see it if they are patient enough to first play through the inferior main game and its earlier expansion *Heavensward*. Stick with it, however, and *Stormblood* will be a worthy reward. It's not only a great expansion to a much-improved MMO. It's also, in story terms at least, a game that stands tall among the best *Final Fantasy* has to offer.



ABOVE Lyse fights for Ala Mhigo's freedom in order to honour her father and sister. Both of them were key players in its liberation movement years earlier before they were put to the sword by their Garlean oppressors



MAIN Every dungeon houses three bosses that require a unique strategy to beat. This fellow requires players to stand in specific elemental rings to avoid attacks.
ABOVE *Stormblood* adds several new races to the lore of Eorzea, including the extremely loyal Lupin, many of whom fight for the Empire in hopes of earning their freedom.
LEFT The city of Kugane is one of the most attractive zones in *Stormblood*. It also has the same amenities as Eorzea's other key cities, making it a great home base while you're out adventuring

Ever Oasis

Here's the thing: 'therapeutic' doesn't necessarily mean 'good'. And, as its title might suggest, *Ever Oasis* is endlessly therapeutic. It's a pleasant blend of action-RPG and town sim with modest aims: earnest storytelling, simple combat and a gently repetitive core progression system. *Ever Oasis* never really leaves its comfort zone. But then, we get the distinct impression it isn't trying to.

It's a far cry from *Secret Of Mana*, the seminal SNES RPG that remains *Ever Oasis* director Koichi Ishii's greatest legacy. It struck out into innovative territory: a realtime combat system with an 'action gauge' to master, a levelling system that rewarded considered play, and a forward-thinking item system. By contrast, *Oasis* retreats into antiquated habits at every turn.

And it's cosy enough at first. After a dark force called Chaos ravages their home, protagonist Tethu must team up with kindly water spirit Esna to build a new oasis. And barring a blip with an archaic, and poorly explained, manual save system that sets us back half an hour – a cruel mistress, nostalgia – it's easy to sink into the routine. You potter about the hub, harvesting fruit, chatting to the chibi populace and prodding the puffball, penguin-like Noots into delighted, delightful little squeaks. Despite the parallels with *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon*, however, daily conversations don't ever stray into the aimless or atmospheric. You, chief, are here to do a job.

The job, it turns out, is 'fetch'. You head out to the desert, where resources and enemies lie, in search of new residents to grow your community. While many will offer to plant Bloom Booths – squat shops that regularly produce the Dewadem currency if you keep them stocked – back home, the most valuable have skills that aid you in dungeon exploration. There's an endearingly analogue method to discovering a new one; they're not marked on the map, clues involving horned grottos or pottery caves encouraging you to scan the skyline for viable landmarks instead.

Once inside, the adventurer's spirit is dampened somewhat. Puzzles and solutions are obviously signposted by the same combinations of copy-pasted elements – an upturned piece of debris, perhaps, or a type of bloom called a Paraflower – that float self-consciously in otherwise barren environments. It's here that residents' unique skills come into play – though 'unique' is really a euphemism for 'downright bizarre'. Your Seedling is one of a party of up to three heroes. Some carry spears that can pull switches and lever obstacles, or crossbows that'll help you hit out-of-reach switches; others can use Paraflowers to fly across gaps, or transform into pellets and whizz through holes.

Whimsy abounds, then – but the novelty soon wears thin, thanks to a poorly implemented party system. Your way is blocked by a giant boulder, but you didn't bring

Developer Grezzo
Publisher Nintendo
Format 3DS
Release Out now

Puzzles and solutions are obviously signposted by the same combinations of copy-pasted elements



NOOT POINT

Director Koichi Ishii's legacy extends beyond *Secret Of Mana* – he's also the man responsible for two iconic *Final Fantasy* mascots, the Chocobo and the Moogles. It's hardly surprising, then, that *Ever Oasis*' furriest race, the Noot, are so instantly memorable. Ishii worked with Yoshinori Shizuma to dream up the design: it's a cross, according to Ishii, between a penguin and an owl, and the result of sheer intuition. Further details amuse: Noots are materialistic shopaholics (we see them wearing a variety of mad accessories) and will queue at busy Bloom Booths in larger oases. They're not total airheads, however – *Ever Oasis*' lore tells of groups of Noots quietly rescuing and reviving fainted desert travellers.

your pal with the giant hammer? Too bad: you'll need to warp back to your oasis hub via an Aqua Gate to switch out characters, then return to continue with the right tools. With plenty of dungeons requiring more than three kinds of specialist resident to fully complete, it's a common and frustrating occurrence that increasingly robs dungeon-crawling of any satisfying flow as the game progresses. There's plenty of ill-advised backtracking, too: as your character's Gale ability powers up, new areas of previous, long-stale dungeons must be revisited.

Realtime 3D combat, while ultimately rather shallow, manages to recapture a little of the lost momentum. Again, success is dependent on who and what you bring into battle, although nowhere near as definitively: certain enemy types are weak to swords or boomerangs, for instance, which can give you an edge. Even a simple two-hit combo takes a good few hours to unlock, but with a lock-on ability and a neat little dodge-roll in your arsenal, the waltz of death entertains. Unfortunately the camera struggles to keep up, switching between party members mid-fight is a fumble and enemy attacks are signposted miles in advance.

Manage to fall foul of a blow, however, and you'll be sorely punished for it: even low-level enemies are capable of nasty hits. Fortunately, if your home oasis is thriving, you'll gain an overshield of sorts, a significant amount of HP tacked onto your meagre health bar. And you will have to thrive to survive. This is the crucial link between RPG and town sim, as the extra HP you can receive is proportional to the overall happiness of your hub. Keep running back to restock those Bloom Booths and fetch residents their lost property, and life out in the wild will be easier in return.

It that all sounds seamless, it's because it is, and the quickly established loop is part of the problem. While compulsive, it doesn't necessarily come off as meaningful. *Ever Oasis* means well, even if it doesn't mean much. Light customisation is available for your bustling oasis; you can purchase a music-making Melody Wheel, for instance, to run on between chores. We're pleasantly surprised when we earn an in-game achievement for waving pointless hellos to the adorable Noots. Even the story has real heart; we find ourselves attached to particular residents' character arcs, and even more so to eternally optimistic water spirit Esna.

There's a real earnestness to *Ever Oasis*' tale, as Ishii and team meditate on our relationship with nature and the value of coming together to build a better, more hopeful world. It's unfortunate that the actual substance of the game doesn't trouble itself to embody that reaching ambition, content to stay resting comfortably at the wellspring of other, better games' ideas. But then, we remember this is the final respite for a console coming to the end of a long journey. In that respect, perhaps *Ever Oasis* is a fitting last gasp.



ABOVE Keep restocking residents' Bloom Booths with saleable materials, and they'll hand out stamps. Fill up your card with ten, and you can hold a festival that'll throw customers into a spending frenzy



TOP Boss battles are varied and inventive, often requiring the use of multiple residents' abilities. Gryphon statue Baastu's weak spots are obscured by piles of sand that must be first blown away. Here, Scrimpon will go down with a hammer to the belly.

MAIN As the difficulty ratchets up, improving your gear is essential. Completing objectives yields crafting recipes to beef up weapons or toughen armour. You can even auto-equip your best new gear with a single button press.

RIGHT Esna's job is to sit in a big, sparkly puddle and wait for you to make everybody else happy for her, which probably explains why she's so chipper. She does come into her own by game's end, however



Black The Fall

Primo Levi writes in *The Drowned And The Saved* of how Nazi concentration camp overseers secured the cooperation of certain inmates against their comrades, exposing a “gray zone” between oppressor and victim. In Levi’s view, the horror of a system such as National Socialism is that it doesn’t merely destroy people but “makes them resemble itself”, turning the subjugated into their own exploiters. This is an idea crucial to Sand Sailor’s cinematic platformer *Black The Fall*, a dystopian fantasy loosely modelled on firsthand experience of the Soviet occupation of Romania, in which the mechanisms of escape are also the mechanisms of tyranny. Among the game’s key puzzle props is a laser pointer, obtained from one of the flabby bullies in welding visors who stomp around the game’s cyclopean factories directing sentry turret fire with a guttural roar. As a fugitive machinist heading for the border, you’ll use it both to trigger objects such as elevators and to command other workers, stooped and shrunken souls pierced by radio antennae — ushering them toward switches you can’t reach with managerial brusqueness.

At other times, you’ll treat your fellow downtrodden merely as camouflage, pedalling away on an Orwellian parody of an exercise bike alongside hundreds of fellow proles as you wait for the syrupy glare of a motion sensor to pass by. Later on, you’ll serially mistreat a canine robot after freeing it from a cage, ordering the friendly little creature into grinding cogwork to stall a piston, or even using it as a projectile to stave in a door. In the process, you’ll walk a troubled line between struggling with the game’s apparatus of brutalisation and benefitting from it, a highwire act that links *Black* to *Inside* and the venerable PS1 *Oddworld* titles.

Sand Sailor’s debut isn’t quite a match for Playdead’s clearly influential output — its thematic architecture isn’t as grotesquely evolved, its puzzles rougher around the edges. It also inherits the *Limbo* developer’s taste for trial and error, with pitfalls that leap out at you sadistically from pitch blackness, and stealth sections that punish detection with immediate death (thankfully, checkpointing is extremely generous). Nonetheless, this is both a sturdy genre piece and a poignant, adroit excavation of a torrid period, blending raw science-fiction theatrics with an array of delicate, naturalistic details. Among the grander instances of the former are the boxy robot ogres that roam the game’s shell-shocked exteriors, forcing you to cower behind huge canisters of fuel while scaring up crows as a distraction. Among the lovelier examples of the latter are the candlelit memorials that flower in certain corners — shows of quiet defiance amid the crushing darkness of the architecture.

Like *Inside*, *Black* pitches austere mechanics — running, jumping and climbing on a 2D plane — against a 3D backdrop of harrowing immensity and mystery,

Developer Sand Sailor Studio
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

This is both a sturdy genre piece and a poignant, adroit excavation of a torrid period



BEFORE THE FALL

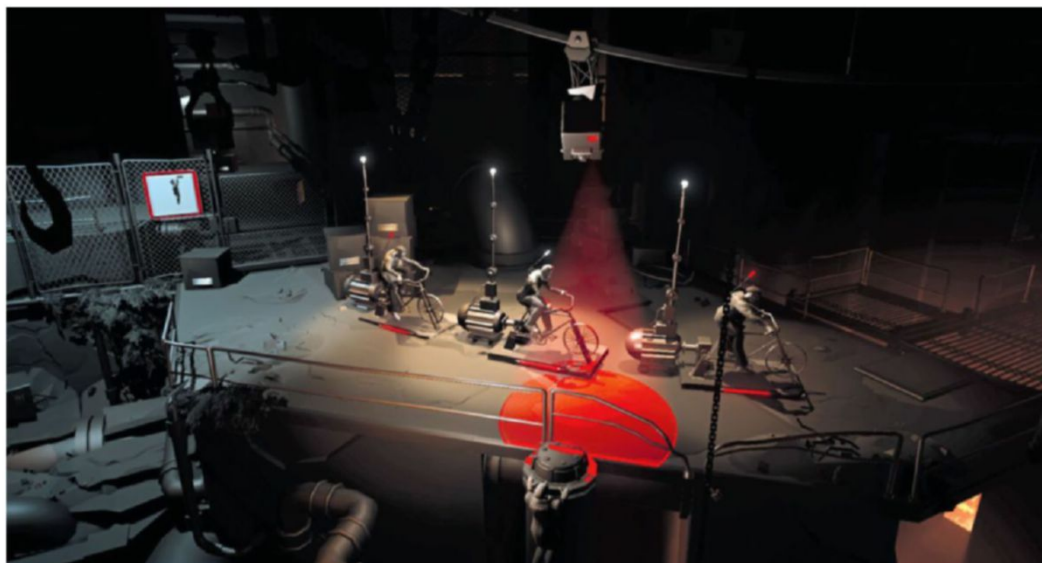
Another explanation for *Black The Fall*’s slightly thrown-together feel may be that it began life as something much more grandiose, a more straightforwardly fantastical epic with gun combat and gear crafting, comparable in feel to Amiga classics *Flashback* and *Another World*. Among other things, the original pitch envisaged a universe in thrall to pseudo-communist Machines, and would have featured three factions, changeable NPC allegiances, a reputation system and a recurring nemesis inspired by Moby Dick. What’s here occasionally feels like a rearrangement, late in the day, of those materials. If the shift to a more directed experience with a stronger documentary focus was advisable, given Sand Sailor’s relative inexperience and size, the idea of a systemic sandbox game dressed up like a Playdead title seems worth returning to.

where each turn of the on-rails camera unearths another ominous artefact or prospect. In the factory that constitutes the game’s opening third, you’ll look on from a gantry as crowds of indoctrinated serfs assemble to bay their hatred at images of the Statue Of Liberty. Out in the wastelands, you’ll gaze upon the elephantine cadavers of spent industry, torn pipes and gutted warehouses stretching to the misty horizon. Portraits of political leaders glare unexpectedly from some windows.

In what feels like mockery of its own strait-jacketed design, the game sometimes lets you interfere just a little with the environment beyond the 2D plane. One switch allows you to activate an enormous Ferris wheel, a wilting spiderweb glimpsed through a jumble of fairground stalls. A puzzle involves guiding an on-rails security camera into an alcove you can’t actually enter. Intriguingly, your robot-dog ally is able to forage in three dimensions, circling you attentively as you trot from left to right — a trait that occasionally causes frustration when you need to clamber on top of it to reach a handheld, but which possibly acts as political commentary. This is a world in which to be mechanical is to enjoy a mobility no longer afforded to the organic.

If the game’s art direction can be astonishing, the puzzles don’t always enthrall. There’s reasonable variety — standout ideas include a section in which you avoid hazards by ear alone, the ability to reflect your laser pointer onto a sensor through a gap in the floor, and a piece of heavy machinery which requires you to time how long it takes your robot ally to cross the screen. But that variety, coupled with the modest four-hour runtime, also means that certain promising concepts are discarded before they’ve had a chance to mature.

While the pacing is elegant — the transition to a daylight world is particularly well-judged, arriving just as you’re beginning to tire of the factory’s monolithic shadows — there’s a peculiarly detached quality to *Black The Fall*, a sense of hurrying through scenes of depravity and decay rather than catalysing a narrative. The story does end by thrusting your character into something like a pivotal role, but this seems more the by-product of your ongoing journey from left to right than any belated heroic aspirations. The path even continues beyond the end credits, as you jog past photographs of the Soviet regime’s eventual overthrow and pictures of the developers themselves as children. In this regard, *Black The Fall* is a less satisfying game than any of those that inspire it; players hoping for more of a psychological and literary trajectory might want to investigate Tarsier’s *Little Nightmares*, another homage to Playdead’s work. But you could make the case that it is more honest — a bleak meditation on the idea that the most one can do in such difficult times is to keep your head down, and keep moving.



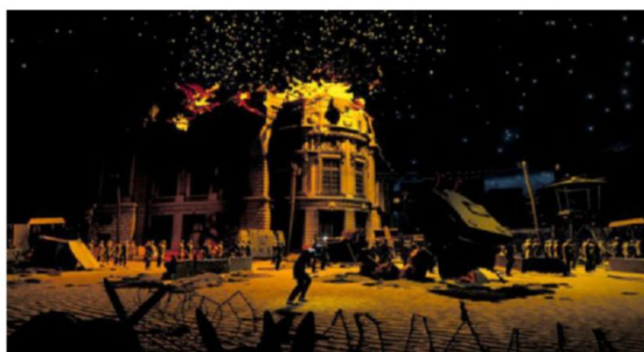
LEFT Some bikes are tethered to a mechanism; most appear designed simply to keep the worker busy. Fortunately for the player, a busy worker is also an invisible worker.

BELOW The game dips in and out of straight portrayal. This powerful scene seems to be modelled on fighting in what is now known as Revolution Square in Bucharest.

MAIN Like *Oddworld*, this is both a paean to and a critique of the inhuman vastness of 20th century industry. It's a game half in love with its own desolation



ABOVE The laser pointer's ray obeys line of sight, and passing a signal through a surveillance beam will trigger reprisals. You may also need to plug it into a terminal to continue to progress in the game



Monument Valley 2

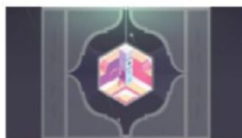
A second set of Escher-esque puzzle-box worlds to tinker with, and clicking together the pieces still thrills. Inquisitive taps and swipes of suspect chunks of architecture are rewarded with musical chimes or unexpected solutions. Your goal is simple: to create a path, no matter how mathematically impossible. If the edges line up, then logic be damned – protagonist Ro will happily walk it.

Getting *Monument Valley 2*'s diminutive heroine from point A to point B is the point, see. But there are no pesky crow enemies to avoid bumping into this time around. All the challenge now lies in the structures themselves – tiny, varied, self-contained labyrinths that grind into new formations or unfold like lily flowers under your godlike fingertips.

Their mechanical variety and creativity has been noticeably broadened. *Valley* veterans will recognise the tell-tale studs that signify an interactive platform, or totem-pole buddies that can be moved while you're riding atop them. But now there are a few extra steps on your journey. One level has you pull its candy-coloured islands into cross-sections, rearrange their insides, then click them back together to engineer a way forward. Another adds an extra layer of perspective trickery onto

The best levels hinge on a grand trick of perspective. The monochromatic fortress in the centre image only becomes 3D when rotated. Another level is a neon Matryoshka of puzzles, zooming into scenes within scenes.

Developer/publisher Ustwo Games
Format iOS
Release Out now



SPIRAL TAP

Monument Valley 2's UI is a beautifully illustrative puzzle box all on its own, chirruping and chiming as you spin it around to browse levels. You're even given power over its design. At the end of each chapter is a chance to create your own 'sacred geometry' drawing to encircle that level in the menu. Slide your finger around a central point and Ro conjures perfect mathematical snowflake shapes according to your movements. It's as oddly soothing to mess about with as the Spirograph toys that so clearly inspired it.

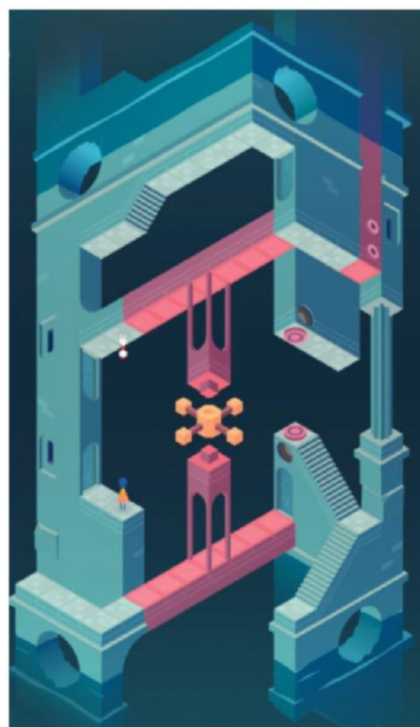
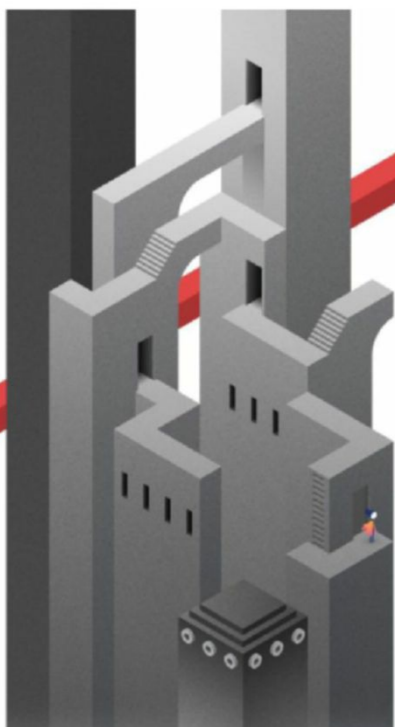
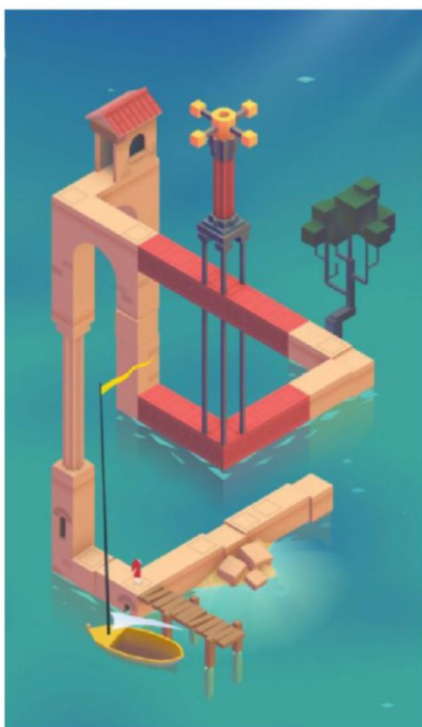
proceedings, where rotating the scene transforms it into an inscrutable cubist painting.

In true *Monument Valley* tradition, atmosphere and whimsy tend to trump actual challenge. There's an endless stream of new mechanical treats to wrap your head around, but some of the best ideas – teleporting doors and magnetic light bridges, for example – feel underdeveloped by a few steps.

But *Monument Valley 2* is a story all about growing pains. Ro is mother to a child; the sprog parallels her movements and, naturally, wants to stay close – a sweet, but logistically complicated, quirk useful for coaxing her towards more elusive switches. There are some delightful links between narrative and design: when paths diverge, changes in sound and colour reflect Ro's turmoil – but your time as a newly independent child is defined by illumination and discovery.

And yet, despite the sheer, breathless volume of new ideas, there's a sense of wonder missing from the sequel. The well-meaning tale feels a little rote in comparison to the first game's supernatural arc of redemption, while its more complex but undercooked new ideas frustrate rather than inspire. Still, there's no doubt that on a structural level, Ustwo has built something bolder and rangier than its predecessor. As a whole, however, it doesn't present quite as seamlessly – and just a little of that Möbius-loop magic is lost.

7



Micro Machines World Series

As its name suggests, this has always been a series that had at least half an eye on selling toys. But when brothers Richard and David Darling signed a deal with Galoob in 1990 that would turn its NES prototype *California Buggy Boys* into *Micro Machines*, licensing agreements came on fewer pages, with fewer stipulations and provisos. So it is that *Micro Machines World Series*, the first new title carrying that licensed name for over a decade, bombards its racers with Nerf-branded weaponry fired from the barrels of GI Joe-branded tanks on Hungry Hippos tracks. It's hardly game-breaking, but it does lend an oddly stern-faced corporate quality to a game ostensibly about racing toy cars around improvised household tracks.

Singleplayer options have been pruned back so far that even a solo championship is absent. Occupying that space instead are casual and ranked online matches, timed special events and unlockable customisation options. The latter are bestowed upon levelling up and trigger a loot-box opening sequence that would put a Blizzard lawyer into cardiac arrest. The message, then, is loud and clear: the titular *World Series* is to be populated and contested by what Codemasters hopes will be an enduring online community.

Familiar racetrack locales are bolstered by new, occasionally inventive obstacles and boundaries: the cracking ice patches in Pond Pursuit come not only with satisfying sound effects, but also lay a watery trap for pursuers

Publisher Codemasters
Developer In-house, Just Add Water
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



THE PERSONAL TOUCH

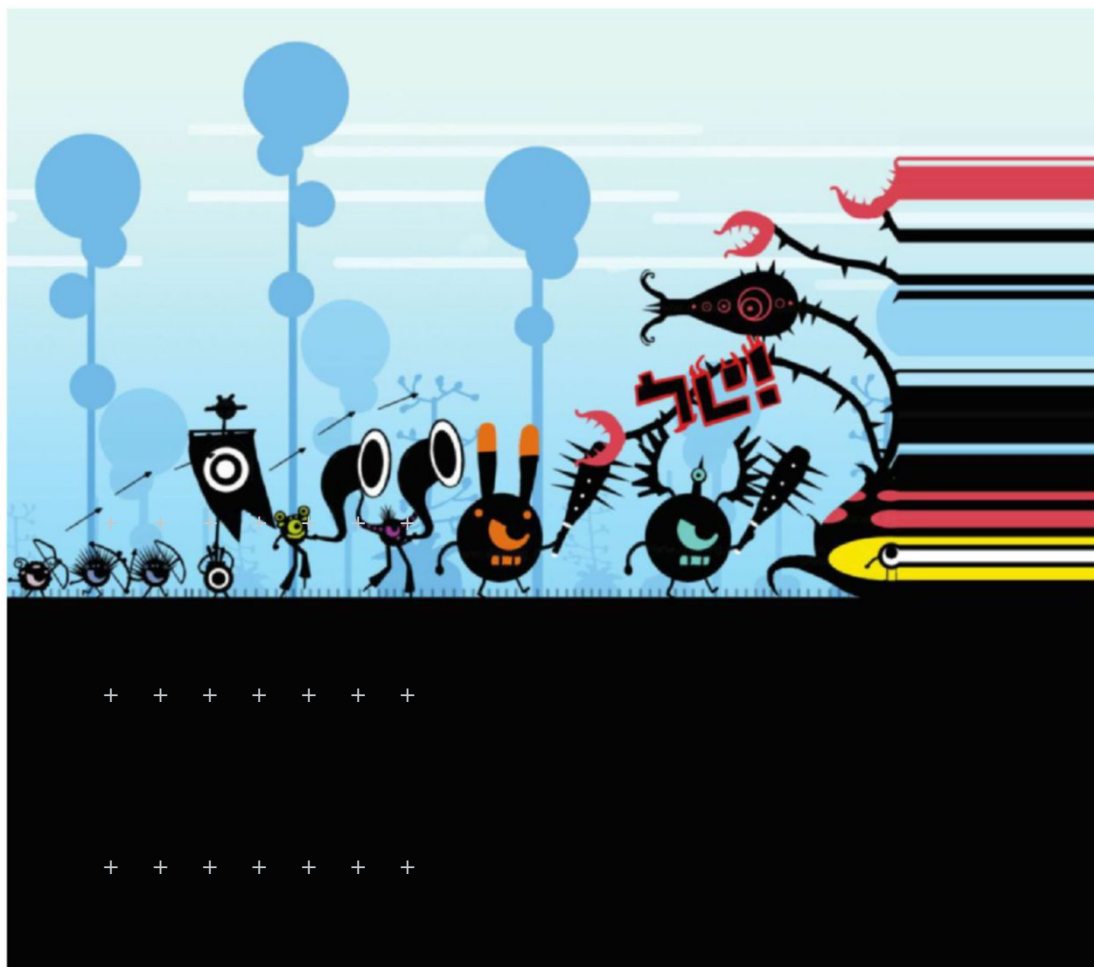
Although the vehicle roster stands at just 12, customisation options for them are almost inexhaustible. Loot boxes drop new skins, voice lines, badges and driver mottos. The latter, along with the occasional loading-screen message, are the only places where Codemasters' character emerges, via descriptors such as 'patiently supportive' or 'unerringly offensive'. The disembodied voice lines of each vehicle attempt to do the same, but never really adhere to the action, and feel more like soundboards for unloved cartoons.

There is, at least, some incentive for said community to stick around beyond the loot boxes. Vehicle handling feels gratifyingly connected to 1991 without edging into unwieldiness. Race, Elimination, and Battle modes feel suitably distinct from one another, although track knowledge is the kingmaker in two of the three. Only in Battles, where vehicles are let loose in arena layouts rather than circuits, does chaos truly prevail, and it's here that the design and implementation of that inescapable Nerf-branded weaponry are most lacking. Whether you're armed with a flamethrower, a shotgun, missile launcher or mine, it's hard to shake the feeling that in the absence of real granular control you're best off spamming the fire button — like everyone else is doing.

The cream is, by and large, more likely to rise to the top during Race or Elimination events. Moveable objects line the bric-a-brac tracks, and it's hard not to smile when a stray sycamore seed, paper clip or Cheerio finds itself deciding a race by slowing a marauding tank that's inches from the line. In that sense, old meets new harmoniously here. But the prevailing feeling is that the past and present are frequently looking at each other a bit bemused. The core racing is pleasingly intact for 16bit nostalgists, but that doesn't make *Micro Machines* a no-brainer for the new-school, season-based multiplayer model.

6





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Patapon

The marriage of god sim and rhythm game that remains PSP's catchiest tune

By EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL

Publisher SCE Developer SCE Japan Studio, Pyramid Format PSP Release 2007

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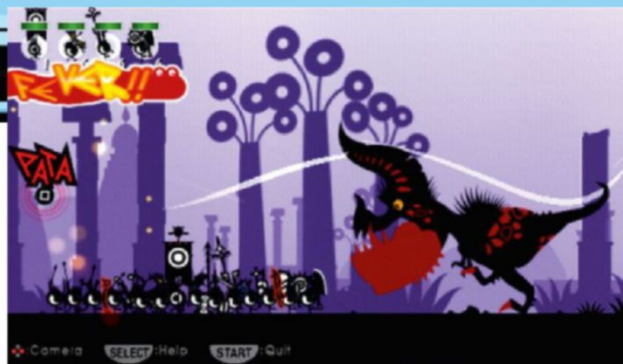
A decade ago, *Patapon* achieved a minor miracle. Upon its release in 2007, it transformed Sony's sorely unromantic PlayStation Portable (which had become a dumping ground for passable handheld ports of the likes of *Monster Hunter* and *GTAIII*) into something more magical than technical, a totem granting the wielder not just control but mystical authority over another realm. Tap the face buttons and drum beats ring out, deepening in timbre the closer they correspond to the flashing of the screen. A horde of curious, heavily armed eyeball creatures shrills a verse in reply, advancing across a landscape of inky monoliths and pastel-shaded trees that owes a little to Mayan architecture and a debt to Dr Seuss. Different drum combinations inspire the horde to attack, hurl themselves backwards or form up behind a shield wall. At first the chorus is mechanical, dogged — the chanting of oarsmen in a galley. But after ten eight-bar repetitions, Fever mode is triggered, supporting instrumental parts fade in, and the Patapons enter a state of ecstasy, whooping and throwing in their own giddy phrases between verses. Your disciples hit harder while Fever is active, but it's also harder to follow the beat. Mess up an input and the army will stumble to a confused halt, wide open to a counterattack.

Patapon is, among other things, a delightful subversion of the god sim — one which eschews the top-down manual camera beloved of western studios like *Bullfrog* in favour of a side-on view that is both a workaround for the PSP's stunted analogue nub and a playful meditation on the nature of divinity. This, surely, is how a deity would perceive the mortal plane, not just as geography glistening far beneath one's celestial sandals but as a more primitive dimension, compressed and unreal. The Patapon language is largely onomatopoeic, a Japanese vocalisation of drum beats, so to play the game is to hear motifs repeatedly translated from one medium to another, mirroring the translation of divine insight into holy writ.

The viewpoint also gives rise to a playful entwining of design and in-game mythology that is open to being taken as religious satire without insisting on it. The Patapons are on a pilgrimage to Earthend, located at the far right of the strip of weather-beaten parchment that is the world map; there, they hope to encounter the fabled 'IT', a conduit to eternal happiness. Their rivals the Zigotons, however, believe that should the Patapons ever gaze upon 'IT' the universe will descend into chaos. So begins a fundamentalist tug-of-war that is every bit as ludicrous as any real-life tussle over a minor point of scripture. While probably not directly influential, *Patapon*'s governing conceits look forward to the philosophical-platformer genre epitomised by Playdead's *Limbo* and *Inside*, in which some form of spiritual catharsis or closure is always just a little further to the right.

Patapon is the brainchild of Hiroyuki Kotani, a long-serving but not especially well-known Sony designer whose career began with Super Famicom RPG *Dual Orb II* in 1994. The Patapons themselves, however, were originally conceived by French artist Sebastien 'Rolito' Giuli as animated fixtures for his professional website in 2002. Kotani has suggested that the entire game arose from contemplation of Rolito's designs — "Cute but at the same time kind of primitive, with a wild charm," as he put it to *Siliconera* in 2008 — but the concept also owes something to his comparably whimsical 2002 rhythm game, *Mad Maestro*, and readings of western genre fantasy, specifically the idea of a rite of passage into an unearthly realm. One of the first things you do in the game is sign a contract, promising to guide the Patapon tribe to Earthend, recalling how Bastian in *The Neverending Story* must read a magical tome in order to open a path to the dominion of the Childlike Empress.

This quirkily legalistic overture has a distancing effect, as does the Patapon tribe's awareness of the fact that its deity is, in fact, a player — fudge a drum beat or instruct the army to attack something that has moved out of reach, and you'll attract sarcastic reactions in speech bubbles. This may sound like heresy, per the ▶



school of thought which holds that all points of rupture between player and world must be steamed out through a combination of sheer overwork and high-fidelity graphics technology. In practice, though, dramatising your entrance into the universe only adds to the illusion, and the idea of engaging in a boisterous dialogue of sorts infuses a broadly familiar relationship between player and minion with unusual sympathetic force. In this regard, *Patapon* feels like a game designer's meditation on the practice of call-and-response in African music, a harmonious exchange that reinforces the bonds between members of community while playing up differences of status.

Blurring ideas from realtime strategy, role-playing games and 2D beat 'em ups, *Patapon*'s core is at once intuitive and

manoeuvres even as you commit those catchy drum phrases to muscle memory.

The game's boss encounters bring all this to a head. Between sorties against the Zigotons, you'll pitch the Patapon army against mythical creatures with distinct attack patterns. These encounters — all replayable at tougher difficulties for greater rewards — are the game's most spectacular, as the Patapon vanguard swirls around the

As long as your redoubtable standard bearer Hatapon is alive, your army can carry on fighting. Unfortunately, he can't attack or defend himself

FAIL A MISSION, AND YOU MAY BE UNSETTLED BY THE SILENCE THAT GREETS YOU WHEN YOU RETURN TO THE CAMP

arcane. There are only a handful of commands you can issue — attack, retreat, march, bunker up, and triggers for various special abilities — and they apply to the entire army, so it's impossible to, say, order a squad of spear-throwing Yaripons to run away from a fiery bombardment while shield-armed Tatepons dig in. This inability to do more than bash out the score is frustrating to begin with. Different Patapon units move at different speeds, so to issue the attack order too often is to risk stretching your forces out — it's common for slower, tougher warriors like the brutish Dekapon to fall behind the flimsy cavalry they're supposed to be protecting. But after a few clashes, you learn the art of compensating for your army's occasional incoherence, developing a general's feel for the timing of offensive and defensive

feet of dinosaurs and golems like the Lilliputians of *Gulliver's Travels*, nipping and jabbing. They're also a nicely disguised battle of the bands. Boss patterns may fall out of sync with the backing beat, throwing you off at a critical juncture — a sandworm repeatedly smashing its belly against the earth is as much an assault on your sense of tempo as it is on any Patapons unfortunate enough to be clustered nearby.

Such bruising engagements aside, *Patapon* also disproves the assumption that rhythm-action games are breezy, skin-deep affairs by way of its progression system, which sees you breeding and outfitting new Patapon varieties between missions using the spoils of war. This gives the game more longevity, but does create a slightly unwelcome element of grind. If replaying boss battles in hopes of a rare mineral is a



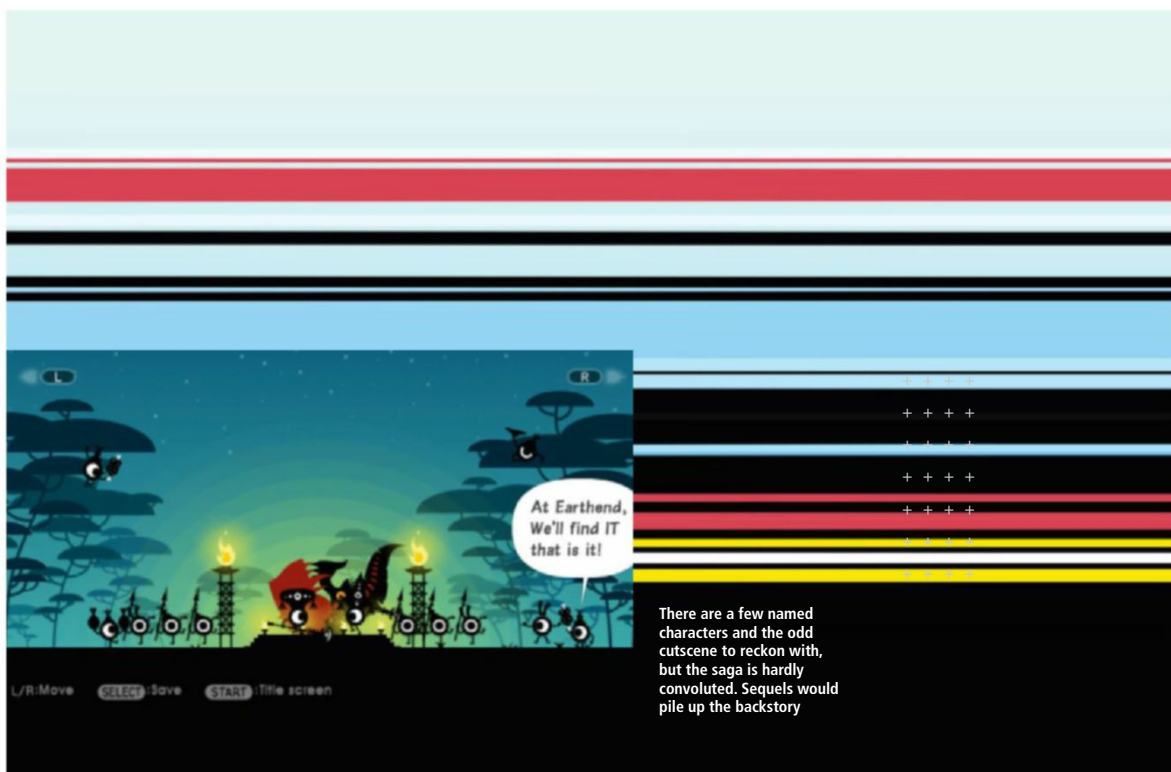
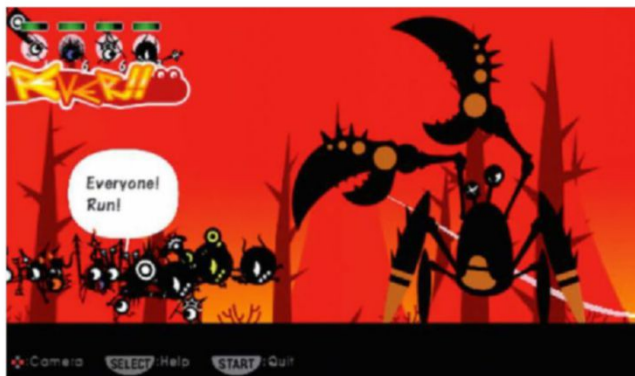
Rarepons are varieties of Patapon unlocked by spending resources during minigames in between missions. They have better base stats than the rank and file, but can't equip helmets



DANCE OFF

Patapon's first sequel introduced revivable heroes, who can equip masks to use various special abilities, and a multiplayer mode in which up to four players must transport an egg to an altar, then hatch it through the power of percussion. The third game doubled up on the concept of customisable heroes while adding competitive multiplayer, in which teams vie for control of fortifications. Both were well-received, but they elaborated upon, rather than expanded, the first game's appeal, and the increasing focus on heroes as personifications of the player is a betrayal of Kotani's original premise, which kept you at a distance.

Retreat commands must be timed carefully – the Patapons will surge back into position after the move completes, even if an enemy's attack is still unfolding



There are a few named characters and the odd cutscene to reckon with, but the saga is hardly convoluted. Sequels would pile up the backstory

thrill, the same can't be said for 'hunt' missions in which you chase down inoffensive fauna. The experience is at its most gripping when intricacies of this sort are conveyed through the ears and fingertips, rather than served up to the player in the tedious shape of character statistics and loot drops. The focus on music also charges lulls in the action with eerie power. Fail a mission, and you may be unsettled by the silence that greets you when you return to the Patapon camp.

Patapon ends with the discovery that Earthend is, in fact, merely the ocean and 'IT', the rising sun, a spectacle that symbolically coincides with the Patapons gazing away from the player, into the suddenly perceptible depths of the backdrop. The game would have less trouble crossing oceans in reality – with two

sequels to its name, it stands as an improbable example of a unmistakably Japanese title that has international reach, though its sales fell predictably well short of the likes of *GTA*. *Patapon* also, thus, stands as a mark of what the moderately popular PSP could have been had it managed to divorce itself from the shadow of PS2 and Sony's broader multimedia empire, which looked upon the device as a 21st century Walkman. The almost aggressively delightful *LocoRoco* is the obvious companion piece – it, too, makes a virtue of indirectness, asking you to tip the world with the shoulder buttons in order to propel smiling, singing jellybaby creatures past a variety of predators and deadly plant-life. It's difficult to trace the shadow of either series today, with Sony's handheld business at large in the doldrums, but they can, perhaps, be considered part of an ongoing preoccupation with the idea of gameplay as a negotiation with fictional entities, rather than the mundane and inherently callous act of exerting your will. As with Fumito Ueda's *The Last Guardian*, which entered active development during the year of *Patapon*'s release, Kotani's peculiar yet harmonious hybrid makes the process of wooing unruly, semi-autonomous creatures part of the fun. It's a title that understands that game worlds are often most enticing when they're a little disobedient, a little impetuous; when they require you to develop a feel for underlying rhythms, rather than simply drumming everybody into line. ■





XBOX ONE X: WE'VE TRIED TRUE 4K GAMING



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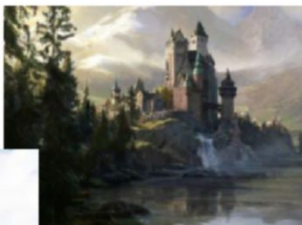
A host of development legends tell us how they broke into the game industry. Plus: the people heading up some of the best options for finding your own way in



Cliff Bleszinski



Wargaming



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Expert mode

A panel of industry legends tell us how they got their break in games – and offer advice for doing the same today

ROBIN HUNICKE
CEO, Funomena



MY STUDIES I did an undergraduate degree in women's studies, oral narrative, film and fine art, and I minored in computer science. Then I went to graduate school in computer science for many years, and that's where I started working on games. And then I left for the game industry before finishing my PhD to go and work on *The Sims*.

MY BREAK I basically did a lot of volunteering when I was a student with the IGDA, and teaching in workshops at GDC. I worked on curriculums for

teaching game design. And then later, much later, after I was a successful game designer, I ended up going back to academia and getting hired at UC Santa Cruz and now I run two programs there. So it's kind of a full-circle thing.

MY ADVICE I always tell people to volunteer their time and to meet people who are like-minded, and think of industry connections, and breaking in, as finding your home as opposed to networking. When you approach it from the perspective of, "How am I going to get a dream job?", you may end up getting something that is more about the title or the money than it is about the actual day-to-day experience, and that's a real recipe for unhappiness.

MICHAEL CONDREY
Studio head,
Sledgehammer Games



MY STUDIES I didn't know what I wanted to do when I started at the University Of Washington in Seattle. The US education system gives you some time – to take some prerequisite classes and try and figure out what you're passionate about. I thought I was going to go into medicine, so I started studying biological sciences. In my sophomore year I became really enamoured with scuba diving as a pastime; I became a scuba-diving instructor. Seattle's a lot like London: it's cold, it's dark, and the water isn't particularly fun to dive in. So after my sophomore year I decided to head to the Caribbean for a year. I went down to Grand Cayman, I taught scuba diving, I drove dive boats, I had the time of my life, and I fell in love with the sea. I came back to the University of Washington and I thought, well, I want to be a marine biologist – marry my passion for scuba diving with my education. I thought, well, you know what else I really like to do? I like to travel, so I want to be a marine veterinarian. I want to travel to Kenya and help preserve dolphin populations. So I started studying biotechnology. I finished my undergrad with a dual degree in biotechnology and ecological conservation.

MY BREAK The summer after I graduated, but before starting graduate school, I took a summer job as a production assistant at Electronic Arts. Because, you know, I had 'technology' in my resume! It happened to be biotechnology, which meant it had no



Sledgehammer's Michael Condrey began his career at EA working on *FIFA*, but one of his earliest credits is as an associate producer on Eurocom-developed *N64* game *007: The World Is Not Enough*

"When you love what you do, you'll do the best work of your life"



ABOVE Robin Hunicke quit her PhD studies six months before graduation so she could work on *The Sims*

applicable value to game making, but I liked games and it was a summer gig, so I started at the very bottom. I had a really great time, and I was offered a job as an assistant producer, working on *FIFA* and *Need For Speed*. At the end I was like, "I gotta go to graduate school." EA said, "Look, graduate school will always be there. But you like us, we like you – just give us a year. We'll teach you how to make games, then you can go to grad school." Twenty years later, I'm still making videogames.

MY ADVICE There was a lot of good fortune in my story – right time, right place. The industry was young and I had a good education, but not a particularly applicable one. I have two pieces of advice: first, find what you're passionate about, because when you love what you do, you'll do the best work of your life. Secondly, if you know what you're passionate about, there is a programme out there to get you ahead. Whether you're a designer, an engineer, an artist, or you want to learn how to be a manager, there are university programmes out there today that'll get you ahead and prepare you far better than I was.

And I think that's a prerequisite now. Passion goes a long way, but it's a competitive industry. Your resumé has to find a way to stand out. We have a very high bar at Sledgehammer, and there's a higher importance on prerequisite skills than when I got in.

We have a group of designers coming out of USC right now and they're the smartest people I've ever seen in my life. They are prepared to succeed in this industry, light years ahead of where I was. If I had to compete with that now, resumé to resumé, I wouldn't stand a chance.



Jazz Jackrabbit gave Cliff Bleszinski his big break. It spawned a sequel, but a planned third game was cancelled. Never mind: Bleszinski cashed out his stake in Epic, and was an early investor in Oculus

CLIFF BLESZINSKI

Co-founder, Boss Key Productions



MY STUDIES

I was completely self-taught. I'm 42: when I got started, there were only computer science programs, there weren't game design programs. I was a bit of an introvert. I was in drama, which I would do, but I was also an introvert at the same time – it's the classic case of an introvert who has to try and be an extrovert. So I had a lot of spare time on my hands. I wasn't dating a lot at the time; I just wanted to make games. I'm a college dropout.

MY BREAK I made a game. I made crappy little adventure games that no one bought, so I made a game called

Palace Of Deceit, and then I sold that out of my mom's house, and I sold a bunch of copies to pay my bills from high school until *Jazz Jackrabbit* came along. Then I basically hooked up with Epic on CompuServe, and they had the distribution method to make lots of copies of the game, which I did not. Step three: profit.

MY ADVICE Pick a primary ability and be better than anyone else at it. It's okay to have a secondary ability, but don't be the jack of all trades, master of none. When I ask somebody what do they do, and they're like, "A little bit of everything", I'm like, "Yeah, then you're pretty bad at all of it". And make something. I always say, if you want to be a chef, burn some food. Get going. Your first work's going to be terrible and you'll get better and better and better over time. ▶





DEBBIE BESTWICK
Co-founder, Team 17



MY STUDIES I was doing my A-levels in Nottingham, but during the summer holidays I took a job in an independent videogames shop. I fell in love with the game industry and never went back to finish my A-levels!

MY BREAK Within two months I'd become manager of the store, and six months later I negotiated the sale of the company to Wakefield-based entrepreneur Michael Robinson, who at the time owned UK retail chain Microbyte. Robinson, who also owned 17-Bit Software, which produced shareware demos, wanted to begin making games to sell within his own retail stores. He asked me, alongside 17-Bit's head, to form a new company, Team 17.

MY ADVICE Our industry is so creative and diverse, the only thing that can hold you back is lack of drive or ability. So, keep passionate, be tenacious, absorb all you can and always try to learn something new each day.

If you're not sure what you'd like to do within games, or want to gain more

experience, then QA is always a great place to get your foot in the door. Working in QA can help widen your understanding of all the different roles within the production and development side of the industry, and it doesn't require specific qualifications. We just look for a keen eye for detail, passion for gaming, and good communication.

DAVID ALLEN

Executive producer,
Bungie



MY STUDIES I studied computer science as an undergrad at the University Of North Carolina. Then I went to graduate school at Carnegie Mellon. I was in a programme called entertainment technology: it's an interdisciplinary graduate programme that ends in a Masters degree where

videogames, or things like museum exhibit design, theme park design, that sort of stuff.

MY BREAK While I was at Carnegie Mellon I got an internship at Treyarch between my first and second years. I was a production intern on *Call Of Duty 3*. After I went back to school, one of the associate producers there, Matthew Burns, ended up going to Bungie to work. When I was looking for work I talked to him and he said, 'We have this entry-level producer contract, you should apply.' So I started as a contractor, moved out to Seattle, and they kept me on. Here we are.

MY ADVICE

There's a lot of ways to work on games these days, whether that's finding a group online that's working on mods, or whether it's making something on your

"Absorb all you can and always try to learn something new each day"

they bring together people of various backgrounds – artists, sound designers, engineers and so on – and a lot of it is focused on making projects. A lot of people that graduate there end up in

own. Just build things. It's a little trickier as a producer, because you're doing a lot of organisation, which means you need a team. But there are groups you can find; there are game jams. Do whatever you can to make games and show that passion – that goes a really long way.

Some of the best advice I got at grad school that I always try to keep in mind is, once you get your foot in the door, always ask questions. Ask as many questions as you can, of as many people as you can, without being a total nuisance. It's much better to ask questions – because people are generally really excited to talk to you about what they do – than to pretend you know what you're doing and find out later that you did not.

And if you run out of work, ask for more. Ask your manager, ask the person sitting next to you; just try to be helpful. That really helped me understand what everybody was doing. On a big game with a big team, there are so many



David Allen's Treyarch internship led to a production credit on *Call Of Duty 3*. While some of the more senior members of our panel lucked into the industry, Allen's route seems well planned – though he admits a good dose of fortune was still involved, since a friend alerted him to a vacancy at Bungie

people with so many different jobs. As a producer, the more you can understand about how the pieces fit together, the better you'll be.

STEFAN STRANDBERG
Creative director, DICE



MY STUDIES I studied art history! And I wrote a thesis on pinball games.

MY BREAK I became a self-taught recordist. I started with flight simulators doing engine sounds, and my break came when DICE needed a sound designer for a rally game [*Rallisport Challenge 2*]. My expertise was in engine sounds; I was building up a library and I was selling it to other companies. I worked with audio for years, which is the most, I would say, cross-disciplinary, well, discipline, because they're last!

MY ADVICE It's not about what's in your portfolio of things you've done, your expertise. It's about the conviction, curiosity and passion that you bring. You need to *want* it. You need to want to be in this industry. You can tell that from a person on day one, whether they're in it because they love what they're doing or not. Then you need high analytical skills. If you can't break stuff down to their core components, you don't really understand what you have in front of you. It's something you can get better at. Ultimately, you have to pursue the thing that's closest to your heart. I started as a modder, changing sounds I thought were bad, and that became my line of work. You have to start there: what do you want to do?

NATHAN VELLA
President, Cappy Games



MY STUDIES I went to film school at Ryerson University in Downtown Toronto, Canada. I focused on post-production, meaning editing and visual effects. I was super interested in how



Given DICE's focus on *Battlefield* and *Star Wars Battlefront*, it's easy to forget its history of racing games. Had the studio not made *Rallisport Challenge 2*, Stefan Strandberg's career might look very different

tech was changing film, and spent most of my time there teaching myself Final Cut Pro, After Effects, Photoshop and all the rest.

MY BREAK I made my own break, alongside the other co-founders of Cappy. At the time, there were only one or two game studios in Toronto. So we started one instead. We worked on it as a hobby for a couple of years quite seriously, and once we finished our first projects we were able to get the help of Flashman Studios, a games agent, to start doing small work-for-hire games. That's how Cappy started, and how my career started. In hindsight, it was a great way to get a start. I had no idea it would lead to being a part of running a cool (I think?) independent studio, with some of the most talented people in games as my co-workers and friends.

MY ADVICE My only real advice is to start making games now. Make your own games, or work with people to make games together. Succeed or fail, you're not only creating a portfolio, but also figuring out what aspects of gamedev interest you. Far more than what school you went to or what courses you took, the games you make are your foot in the door. It's not going to be easy, but it's the best experience you can get.

KOJI IGARASHI
Creator, *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night*



MY STUDIES It was all self-taught. I had to buy books, I didn't really learn from school or anything. I would read books and think, "Oh, I want to make that kind of game." So I decided to study other games that I enjoyed. In college when I was a student, I was studying filmmaking: in terms of creating something and showing it, that's something that's always been with me from the very beginning.

MY BREAK How I got into the game industry is kind of coincidental. My college classmate was part of the industry, and he invited me to be part of his company and create games, and I was like, "Yeah, why not? I'm free!" That's how I started. I didn't have a proper education, but once I got into the gaming industry, that was my education – I learned from looking at other people's code and things like that.

MY ADVICE You've probably heard that the gaming industry is a warzone. But the first thing I would say is that you have to know what is fun and what isn't fun. If you want to create your own game, you have to know exactly what part of the game is fun, what would make it fun – certain aspects, in detail. ■





Location Minsk, Belarus



**JULIA
OGANOVA**
Global marketing
manager
wargaminglabs.com

Currently playing:
"I'm very much into time management games. I enjoy playing *World Of Tanks* – not because I work at Wargaming, but because the game's mechanics and gameplay are so addictive. Among the latest titles, I just loved *Little Nightmares*."

INDUSTRY ADVICE

"Focus on creating great experiences you can rally around. Don't be afraid to make mistakes, and never think you can't do something outside your area of expertise. Step outside your comfort zone, try new things, and punch above your weight. Filter feedback – only listen to the people you respect and don't indulge the rest. And never give up on your dream."

Wargaming Labs

How the World Of Tanks publisher is giving something back

Founded in Minsk in 1998, Wargaming made its name developing multiplayer strategy games for PC. In 2010, it hit the big time with *World of Tanks*, expanding to become a hugely successful global publisher and developer. It has since established a new division, Wargaming Labs, to broaden its portfolio by working with external developers.

How was Wargaming Labs formed?

It wasn't something that just happened one day. Over the years, Wargaming has picked up a lot of experience publishing different games on different platforms and in different regions. We've always had a strong sense of giving something back and helping out other companies. Thus, the idea of Wargaming Labs was born – a division that focuses on helping devs publish titles big or small.

What in particular are you looking for when people submit new projects?

How can developers make their projects more attractive to you?

Wargaming Labs is aimed at supporting games mainly by indie, young-gun



Sprawling sci-fi 4X game *Master Of Orion* was one of two Wargaming Labs titles to launch last year

be focusing on PC first and console projects second. It doesn't mean that we limit developers in terms of genre and setting. What we are interested in most are projects that can be offered to our 180 million-strong audience.

What kind of expertise can you offer to potential partners?

First and foremost, we have access to Wargaming's colossal resources. This

twin-stick shooter for PC (*Hybrid Wars*) and *Caliber*, a co-op shooter for our Russian audience. We don't limit ourselves to a particular genre.

Wargaming has grown from a small indie company to a huge one. How do you maintain a start-up spirit?

Speaking about Wargaming Labs, we've never been a huge team, as some may think when they hear 'Wargaming' in our title. In fact, we're a small, focused bunch of professionals. We understand that only close communication with those who create games will help us understand what makes the game industry tick, how to speak a common language with developers and how to retain this start-up spirit. However, due to our access to all Wargaming's resources around the world, our expertise goes far beyond that of a usual startup. These capabilities empower us to experiment with new mechanics, services, and business models, providing external developers with business, promotional, and operational support needed to refine prototypes into finished products. ■

"We've always had a strong sense of helping out other companies"

devs, featuring outstanding game mechanics. Of course, we have a number of standard requirements: playability, implemented core features, technical stability, and so on. Besides that, we expect those eager to collaborate with us to be passionate gamers and tech-savvy developers. If we are talking about newcomers with little or no background or expertise, it's their gaming experience that is of the most value. In general, in 2017 we'll

enables us to provide our potential partners with expertise we've gained in development and publishing, as well as to give access to our massive audience.

Wargaming is renowned for strategy games. What can you offer those working in other genres?

Our laboratory is a standalone unit where we work with projects that are beyond the Wargaming development tradition. We have dealt with an indie

**We're Wargaming Labs, and we help exciting game projects
get the exposure and promotion they deserve.**



WARGAMING LABS

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for each region



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and marketing plan,
regionally and globally



Define strategy
and promotion
for each region



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Location Swansea, UK



JOHN CARROLL

Senior lecturer and programme director
uwtsd.ac.uk

Currently playing:
"Despite the issues with *Mass Effect Andromeda*, being a fan of the series has allowed me to get hours of enjoyment from it. *Mafia III*'s facial animation and combat mechanics are some of the best I have seen."

INDUSTRY PROSPECTS

"Art and design students who want to move into the UK game industry should always prepare a good portfolio of work and be confident in how it is presented in any interview. Always tailor your portfolio to the position you are applying for, which could mean having different portfolios for different situations and skillsets."

Swansea College Of Art: UWTSD

Producing impeccable results through collaborative learning

The Swansea College Of Art hosts an MArts/BA (Hons) Creative Computer Games Design course aimed at students with skills in art and design and familiarity with the game industry. Senior lecturer and programme director **John Carroll** has forged a partnership with Sony's PlayStation First academic programme, and the course now provides students with access to leading VR and motion-capture technology.

What makes UWTSD the right choice for students?

I think our approach to assessing the work on the MArts/BA Hons Creative Computer Games Design is what makes the course the most effective. Learning to not only develop their own individual strengths throughout the three or four years of their study but to also work effectively within a production team gives them an edge when moving on into the game industry.

What are the main benefits to working within production teams?

Since changing our course to this more focused approach we have had a 100



UWTSD alumni have gone on to work on such blockbuster games as *Alien: Isolation* and *GTAV*

with all the available cohorts within our faculty like Music Tech, 3D Computer Animation, and Film & Television to produce more in-depth projects.

In a constantly evolving industry like games, do you find yourself having to adapt your approach to teaching?
I believe the general principles of art and the theory of design never really

a more traditional arcade-platforming game. The PlayStation First programme will allow one of our teams in the next academic year to develop a PlayStation VR game demo for which they are currently in pre-production over the summer before starting on their third year in October.

What attributes does a prospective Swansea student need?

Dedication and enthusiasm are high on the list of attributes we look for in all of our potential students. The students are committing to a significant length of academic study, and they should be passionate about what ideas they want to present throughout their time on the course. We interview all of our potential students and ask them to bring along a portfolio or any other examples of their work to each interview.

Which tools do you focus on most?

On the course we teach 3D character and environment modelling and texturing using Autodesk Maya, ZBrush and Substance Painter. Game Animation again uses Maya, as well as level design, gameplay mechanics and gameplay theory using Unreal Engine 4, HTC Vive, Oculus and PSVR. We have also started to introduce the process of delivering to game development kits with PlayStation First.

Finally, when students leave, what do you hope they take away from their time at UWTSD?

I believe the collaborative nature of our course gives our students a better understanding of what it is to work as a team within a production, and what is needed to apply their own strengths in relation to those they have to work with. The principles of design, game theory and good practice can potentially set them ahead of the curve. ■

"Dedication and enthusiasm are high on the list of attributes we look for"

per cent record of graduating students for the past five years. This is due to the students focusing on their own individual strengths within a balanced production team, rather than trying to achieve all aspects of the design process on their own. Now that we are part of the PlayStation First programme, our students benefit further because they have an industry-standard development environment to build their ideas on. It also allows our students to collaborate

change, and it is those principles that should remain the most important aspect of any academic achievement, no matter what the course subject is. That said, how those game ideas are delivered and presented at the end of the process needs to be in line with the developing trends within the industry of the time and it's the technology itself that we adapt to the most. Our students developed two distinct VR game demos this year, with one team developing

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GABRIELLE KENT

Deputy head,
game development
tees.ac.uk

Currently playing:
"Horizon Zero Dawn."
There is so much to love about it, from the well-designed heroine, Aloy, to the vast gameplay opportunities, the narrative, and the sheer beauty of the landscapes and inventiveness of the creature design and animation."

INDUSTRY PROSPECTS

"The industry appears desperate for skills and our top students are always snapped up. This is also a great time for independent developers, with a lot of our graduates finding great success in this area. Through our Launch-Pad incubation scheme and Fuel acceleration programme, we help graduates start studios and push forward their businesses."

Teesside University

Evolving its courses to keep pace with a shifting industry

Teesside was one of the first universities in the world to run courses aimed at the videogame, visual effects and animation industries. Its course content is regularly refreshed to reflect current industry practices. Its Games Design course has been split, offering a creative design path, and a more technically focused option. Deputy head of game development **Gabrielle Kent** gives us the details.

Why should students choose Teesside University for their education?

We have earned our excellent reputation and created impressive custom-built facilities for our students. The majority of our staff worked in the game industry before moving into lecturing, and we have Skillset accreditation across a number of courses. Through our annual Animex festival, students have access to talks and masterclasses from studios such as Valve, Bioware, Bethesda, Epic, Naughty Dog, Guerrilla and Blizzard, as well as highly successful independents. We have strong relationships with many studios that lead to placements and graduate jobs.

"We have strong relationships with studios that lead to graduate jobs"

A large number of companies visit us to discuss careers and to recruit directly from our end-of-year show, Expotees.

Have you noticed any changing trends in what students are looking to study?

Many of our students are now choosing to go it alone or set up their own studios after graduating, but need a bit of help with the business and marketing side of game development. In answer to this we created an Indie Game Development



Among its broad range of game-centric courses, Teesside offers a BA (Hons) degree in Concept Art

degree which covers not just design, scripting, mechanics, UI and so on, but also business, marketing and game publishing. Students know that they are looking to get into a very competitive industry, so we aim to ensure we equip them with a wide range of highly transferable skills.

What do you look for in prospective students?

Passion, a positive attitude, and the ability to work as part of a multi-disciplinary team. Teamwork is extremely important to us. We run a number of

The university has a motion-capture studio. Has it now become more important for budding developers to learn those kind of skills?

As the first games course in the UK to have our own motion-capture lab, we have always appreciated the growing importance of the technology to the game industry. This has become evident to employers and many of our graduates have gone on to work at specialist motion-capture studios such as Cubic Motion and The Imaginarium. We also offer a fully equipped post-production suite and sound stage. Our students can access devkits, Leap Motion, 3D laser scanners, full colour 3D printers and much more, and we are currently putting together a dedicated VR lab featuring a number of popular technologies such as HTC Vive and Oculus Rift.

Ideally, what do you hope your students take away from their time at Teesside University?

We aim to inspire our students and to open their minds as well as expand their horizons. We hope that they leave us as positive, team-minded players who don't just fit into the industry, but contribute towards making it a better place for all. ■

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JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

Never have I seen such diligence. Such attention to detail. Such commitment to getting it right for every customer. I'm talking about a game-development company who invited me to partake in pre-game research a while ago. They were just setting out on the construction of a new game, after considerable past success, and were determined to build the best thing ever.

Normally I'm not called in until quite a lot of work has been done, but these people were different. They wanted my total involvement from the get-go, and I even dropped my curmudgeonly persona in order to get on board. And thus I was plunged into the seething world of demographics.

Usually, the games I work on are made for young adult males who like sport and shooting things. Right now you can see the typical gamer in your mind's eye. Yep, that's the fella. I can see him too. Wait. Who's that next to him? Oh, he's a got a girlfriend. OK. Let's add a strong and sassy female character so she can play too. And with that we've hit the target audience, so let's get coding.

It turns out that there's more to it than that, though. A lot more. This company has spent a fortune on research and now it turns out I'm sharing it with you for the price of this magazine; if they find out, they're going to nail me to a tree. Anyway, research (theirs, costly) indicates that the average age of gamers is 34. And although more males play on consoles and PC, far more females play games on mobiles and tablets, making them the biggest consumer group overall. Their average age is over 30, too.

While every gamer is different – apart, obviously, from twins, and my friend Steve – they fall into three groups. Casual, competitive and cooperative. Competitive types are the sort who'd consider gaming a hobby. They'd mention it if they were asked what they do in their spare time if they were on a game show. Cooperative players see games as an extension of social media. If everyone's playing a new coal-mining sim, they want in



We trust that inside our heads,
we know what people want
from games because we're the
most avid gamers of them all

because they see their friends swapping pit ponies and dynamite fuses on Facebook and want to share in that hot underground action. Casual gamers are the vast majority and those are the ones sitting in coffee shops, looking like they're texting. What they're actually doing is making sure the deepest shaft doesn't flood before they hit a new seam.

The meeting where we discussed this identified many more subsets and offshoots of these groups, but a funny-looking bird landed on the window ledge and I got distracted so we'll gloss over that. The takeaway from this, though, is that you ought to make games for

competitive gamers and there are two good reasons why. Firstly – and this is the cynical reason – they're the vocal ones. They're also the reviewers and the experts. If you want any one group of people to like your product, aim for those who will tell everyone. And the second reason is that if you craft a game well enough for competitive players to enjoy, you've almost certainly made a good game for everyone.

Competitive gamers don't need games to be tough or complicated. They need them to be involved and deep. Give the casual gamers a simpler way of doing things and they're happy, though. But make sure that the best, most enjoyable experience only comes with a bit of dedication and thought. So while everyone is collecting random gems to get through the game, the core players are combining them into uber gems which unlock the mother of all daggers and the bullet-proof pelt. Oh, and while all the casual and competitive players are battling through the mountains towards the Haunted Hospital, let's give everyone a zoo back at home and the ability to collect and swap cute animals with each other. So you're happy now too, cooperative guys.

Or, there's a different way. We leave the link to the demographics people and come up with a game idea we love. We discuss it, not in terms of who we're specifically targeting, but in terms of how much we want to play it. Us: paunchy, bearded game devs with unused mountain bikes in our sheds. We talk about what we love and we turn our passion into reality. We trust that inside our heads, we know what people want from games because we're probably the most avid gamers of all, and we've been doing it for a long time. Think of the most inspiring geniuses in the industry and what links them is a vision of the end product and the drive to make it.

Is making games this latter way more risky? Probably. But it's far more fun.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio



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